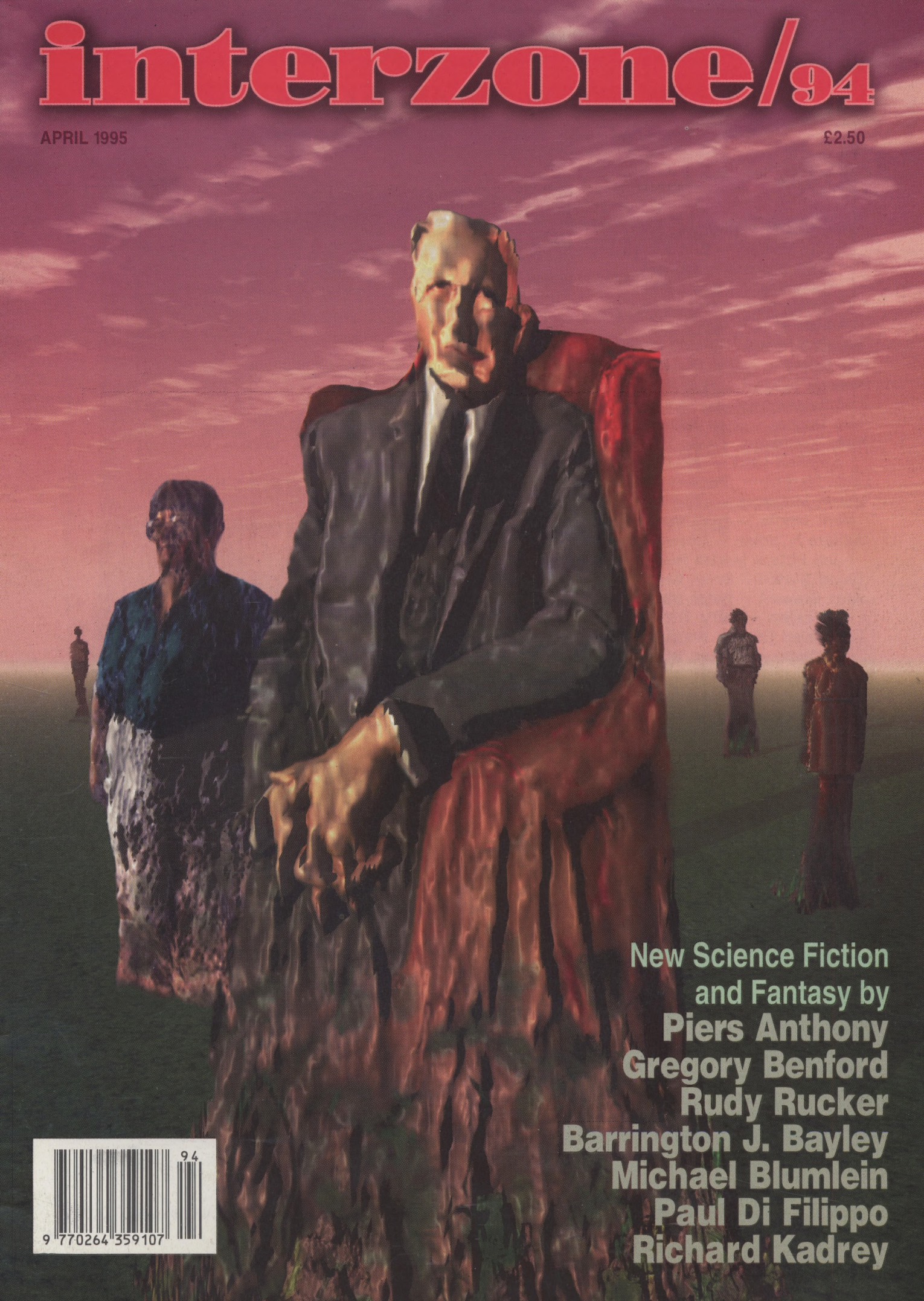


# interzone/94

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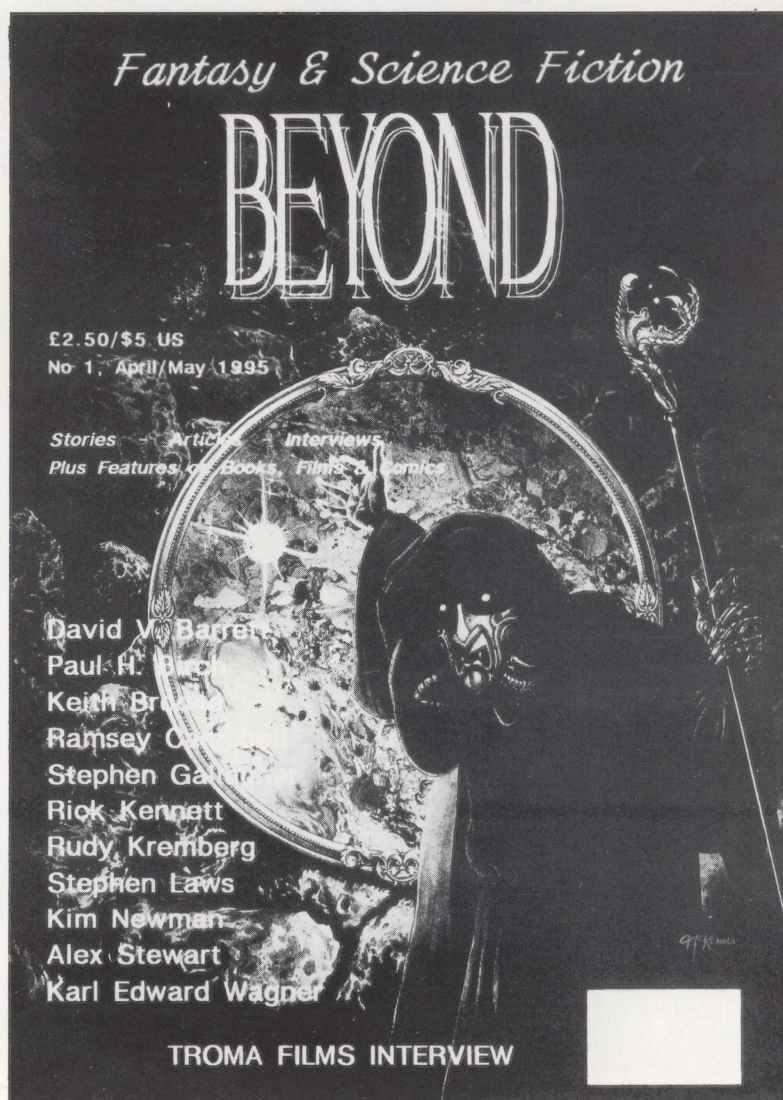
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# INTERZONE

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# GUEST EDITORIAL

## Tomorrow's Technology—Today!

Almost a year ago, *Interzone's* editor/publisher David Pringle gave me the go-ahead to form a fiction development team that would create a unique "theme" issue. The results of this bold initiative are now in your hands: a showcase of speculative extrapolation custom-designed for information-empowered consumers—people like you—who are actively concerned about their position vis-a-vis cutting-edge technology in the new millennium.

It goes without saying that we are poised on the brink of a postindustrial Third Wave that will sweep through our workplace and home environments, revolutionizing the way we pursue leisure activities, do business, and seek personal growth. What will this mean to the individual? How will our families, our freedoms, and our earning power be impacted when radical breakthroughs in information technology, biotechnology, and nanotechnology move out of the laboratory, into the marketplace?

### Better Living through Extrapolation

Science fiction is a recognized tool for attenuating future shock. To help ease the transition into a new age of distributed knowledge and human transcendence, I commissioned a unique group of speculative futurists to perform the following task schedule:

1. Evaluate trends
2. Factor the impact on the social dynamic
3. Devise a plausible model two to three decades in the future
4. Render this model using the tools and attributes of a noninteractive linear narrative

### Breakthroughs in Prose Technology

It was a significant challenge to locate storytelling professionals who were suitably qualified and willing to work within *Interzone's* tight budgetary constraints. The talent search took many man-hours—but time was a resource I was more than willing to deplete in my pursuit of excellence.

Once I had the creative people online, I told them to

ignore the usual limits and seek original solutions to the challenge of developing an enhanced narrative vehicle. I encouraged them to draw on the whole spectrum of extrapolative methodology, including surrealism, Campbellian "hard SF," postmodernism, "slipstream" SF, stream of consciousness, the 1960s "new wave" humanist school, British pessimism/disaster school, and cyberpunk. Fantasy and horror were the only forms which I explicitly negated because of their lack of application to the postindustrial thoughtscape.

After many brainstorming sessions, the cyberscribes transmitted their prose electronically to my Internet site for format conversion. State-of-the-art scanning and processing hardware merged text and graphics, and offset negatives were output directly from Photoshop and Illustrator files. The negatives were air-shipped to the United Kingdom for reproduction as hardcopy.

**Our prose engineers were encouraged to develop fiction prototypes using all available speculative techniques, including surrealism.**



### Reader Satisfaction is Job One

The result? Unprecedented creativity coupled with hard edged functionality—still for the same affordable cover price!

But don't take my word for it. Judge for yourself. Experience the unrivalled conceptual freshness, human insight, and authoritative detail embedded in a solid base of quality prose. I doubt that you'll find a more exceptional blend of rigor and sensitivity anywhere else in speculative fiction today.

At the same time, of course, I welcome your feedback. The most important person here at *Interzone* is *you*, the fiction user. If you feel *Interzone* could be giving you a more powerful catharsis, a deeper suspension of disbelief, or a more profound sense of wonder—please communicate your needs as frankly and freely as possible.

—Charles Platt, Guest Editor (cp@panix.com)



# ANSIBLE HYPERLINK

Complaints about this page should be sent to me at the venerable ansible@cix.compulink.co.uk address, please. This applies \*~\*~♦❖ to those who didn't like our light-hearted January squib about @@❖~ and the Royal □~&.%■~!! , and tried to &%~% by infecting the Interzone node with a viroid that HA HA HA SMEG AVENGER SAYS EAT ENCRYPTED DEATH LANGFORD. This isn't fair ~&{}~♦❖X readers of .

## The Ministry of Truth

**Pat Cadigan** plans a radical publishing route for her thirteenth novel, to be coded as DNA introns in a harmless but contagious strain of colonic bacteria—"green" biological distribution that conserves Earth's dwindling resources of net bandwidth. "This one will hit you right in the gut," she promises.

**Robert P. Holdstock** cancelled his contract to rework the early Holdstock fiction *Mythago Wood* (hitherto available only in non-hypertext form) as a republishable novel. He claims technical inability: "I can't even program my new bathroom, let alone this hard stuff!" Instead, the transliteration to interactive hypertext media will be done by in-house wetware recently installed at HarperCollinsGollanczHodderHeadlinePanPenguinTransworld.

**L. Ron Hubbard** remains locked in a legal death struggle with the Reformed Church of Scientology following his AI recreation in Church neural-net cores. "Hubbard" has written what is claimed to be our field's first-ever hektology (a story extending over 100 book units), but the Church feels its high reputation in sf circles could be diminished by the appearance of the work. A netsurfer spy claims that the sequence caters to still-falling literacy standards by being written wholly in monosyllables, 80-85% of them violent.

**Harry Adam Knight's** recent death in several parts of London was followed by eulogies. "He was the true Dean of Horror," said Ramsey Campbell. "He and Guy N. Smith taught me all I know." The horrific freak accident with a mutated (or tailored?) fungal growth is still under investigation, and author John Brosnan—said to be "very close" to the deceased—is helping the police with their enquiries.

**Larry Niven** impersonators continue to infest US conventions; there have been nasty scenes with as many as five pseudo-Nivens of various sexes claiming precedence. This follows a security breach in the Known Space Library project . . . the engineered RNA secretor enabling subsidiary collaborators to "think like Larry" has been widely bootlegged to aspiring authors, carrying its notorious side effect of personality confusion. From his cyberwheelchair in California the grand old man himself wisecracked, "America can count itself lucky—it might have been Jerry."

**Rog Peyton**, the Birmingham arcana dealer whose Andromeda "Book Shop" closed for the last time this month, was resigned but cheerful. "We knew it was a doomed enterprise and one day there wouldn't be enough paper books to stock a

shop—but it's bloody good to see we outlasted Dillons, Foyle's, Blackwell's and BCA! Don't quote me, Langford you bastard."

**Sir Christopher Priest**, in the wake of editing Harlan Ellison's 80th birthday *Festschrift* last year, has sold a story to that eagerly awaited anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions*.

**Claude Scrote**, star of world-famous children's fantasy series *Pringle & Scrote*, has contracted his unwritten first novel to ArrowOrbitMillennium: this is expected to top UK best-seller lists next year. Since Scrote is a non-aware 3D animation, there's hot speculation as to which genre author will be commissioned for the typing role. Outline and title remain undecided, but the target genre is humorous fantasy . . . news which led to narrowed eyes in the vast Legal Division of Discworld PLC.

## Infinitely Improbable

**BSFA Sticks Neck Out.** Despite the risk of proscription, the British Science Fiction Association is spearheading a protest against our country's latest Criminal Justice Bill proposals—which BSFA hotheads argue will further reduce the legal maximum membership of sf conventions from 250 to 100. This may be a good cause (though fans have learned to love smaller, cosier events), but some proposed tactics have been illicit in Britain since 1998 . . . in particular, harassing MPs with mail and discussing politics on the net.

**SFFHWPPMOA** . . . controversy continues over the “too narrow and elitist” admissions policy of the SF, Fantasy and Horror Writers, Poets, Programmers and Miscellaneous Originators of America.



**Two of the Niven "clones" currently infesting US conventions.**

**Hugo Nominations.** Following the recent introduction of Hugo awards for Best Digital Video Interactive, Best Nanoware, Best Hypertext, Best VR Presentation, Best Braided Giganovel, Best Netzine (professional and amateur), and new parallel fiction and nonfiction categories for freeware, shareware, machine-generated, guided-aleatory, and PierreMenarded works, this column is not afraid to say it has no room to list the nominees.

**15 Years Ago**, in April 1995, Charles Platt himself guest-edited a paper issue of this very magazine. Hard to believe—but that was before the lonely years of prison and exile, the assassination attempt, the surprise DNA rescripting, and his astonishing elevation. Remember he was once one of us . . .

—David Langford



# LOOKING BACK AT BOOKS

I talk corpse century. I talk Look Back! Look Back! talk. I talk Et in Arcadia Ego! talk. This is natural to one who was born before the hundred years began to peak, who remembers the end of World War Two. So I talk the talk of the century of the dead. It is the dying brain cells fastening themselves to the tooth of the past, like Pincher Martin. I do not talk cyb. I am not your cybling, guise and gels. You will have to forgive the sound of the past in the words I write now, the senator larynx. It is forty years from the founding of the New Wave in 1964; it is twenty years since William Gibson sleepwalked like Giordano Bruno into *Neuromancer*, and found an angel in every byte; ten years ago today Dean Rusk died. It has been the decade of Speaker Newt.

There is a choice of books to reflect upon, now that we have entered a twice-told world, like coming to the end of the story. We might for instance consider *Wake*. This fourth and concluding volume of John Crowley's *Aegypt* sequence gravely insists upon the homonym contained in its title, as befits the climax of any series of books in which the bondage-wheel of history is seen 1) not as a cycle but as a spiral out of which we climb over revenants of former worlds, so that to escape is to mourn and wake, both; and 2) only one story in any case, and not necessarily the story which the Sagittarian hero, Pierce Moffatt, *sees* like staring down an arrow: for he is a seer. But this is Et in Arcadia Ego! talk, because Moffatt is a child of the 1960s, and the storied arcadias he discovers are time-slip polders. The four volumes of *Aegypt* constitute perhaps the most profound examination ever undertaken of the twofold nature of the Cusp in fantasy; it is by far the most extended recounting of a central movement of fantasy—a movement at the heart of any definition of the form—the movement across the Threshold into a new story, which is topologically identical to the movement into memory: "Travel backward to a lost land heard of in childhood; find it to be incomprehensible, rich, strange; then discover it is the place from which you set out." So it might be argued that Crowley has pulled the covers of his Book—like a pillow—over the long years of his life, and over the long ending of the century I (for one) inhabited all those years; and that *Aegypt* is more farewell than dawning.

So we must go elsewhere, if we want to find the flavour of the new world embraced with proper vigour; and it should be made clear before the journey that it is not necessary to pretend to like the book that seems most explicitly to represent this new world we've fallen off the spiral into; literary quality and fitness for the age are not necessarily the same thing. There is no reason they should be. All the same, I think we'll eschew most of the books whose existence we could have predicated ten years ago, because they are products of an industry—I mean the industry which produces sharecrops and ties and shared-world and game-world and interactive multi-media texts,

from the famous (and innumerable) sequences by The New Isaac Asimov™, on down—whose whole *raison d'être* has al-

ways been precisely to be predictable. Because their awfulness *is what they are*, there are no jokes worth the telling about any of this stuff, even in retrospect, even by a person who talks corpse century, who stinks liberal.

Instead, I think I'll talk about the last volume of the *Heorot* trilogy. This may seem peculiar—because of the contumely lavished upon the books, on both literary and ethical grounds, in the months since the final instalment came on line, by recidivists and lingerers like myself—but remember that it's not necessary to like what Messers Gingrich, Niven, Pournelle and The Barnes Boys have promulgated. It is only necessary to understand that it was not only clever of the five to turn the first two volumes into such an extraordinary vehicle of propaganda; it was also entrepreneurially sound. The first Park—to be built in Telluride, Colorado, on the thousand-acre site of the famous Mountain Village once owned by the Zoline family (readers of the 20th century journal *New Worlds* will perhaps remember Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" [1967], income from the sale of which was invested in the original plot)—has already received planning permission. Further Parks will be spotted across the Western Hemisphere, and along the Pacific Rim, wherever in fact beleaguered professional men and women of taste congregate, red in tooth and claw from the intolerable begging bowl of the compressing world.

The first instalment of the *Heorot* sequence was written and published long ago, and shows little prescience in its crafting, unless one thinks of the island paradise of Avalon on the planet Tau Ceti as having been deliberately imagined in the shape of a Park in utero, unborn but thrusting. This first volume, *The Legacy of Heorot* (1987), which was written by only three of the eventual quinquieme—Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle and Steven Barnes—did, it must be admitted, come pretty quietly into the world. One high spot, though, in its analysis of political realities is the illuminating speculation that no public-funded organization—in contradistinction to the National Geographic Society, which in this book actually finances humanity's first interstellar trip—would be capable of grasping the nettle of the actual Park project. But the bright spots are not many.

All the same there is a primary insight here, however obscurely it may have been laid down in this first volume; it is an insight which, at first glance, directly violates one's intuitive sense of the nature of libertarianism as a philosophy or way of life. One might pardonably assume that the heart of this ethos, as it is expressed in political terms, lies precisely in its proposed dismantling of a hugely over-elaborate and misconceived machinery of government, leaving individuals responsible for their own actions in a world released from any and all interventionist forms of authority, including taxation, welfare, control of corporate life, and any other category of "protection" which proves, in the end, to sap the human will to make sense of its flesh, to scumble over the shape of human destinies as they are acted out by independent



individuals upon this free planet. Sharper and more womanish than a serpent's tooth is this so-called *car-ing*, you would think.

So at first read, *The Legacy of Heoret* is no paradise for libertarians. The artifactual nature of the paradise itself—the gaping holes in the biota map, for instance, holes through which new native species hurtle in order to menace the human colonists—and the rigidly hierarchical composition of the human settlement itself, both seem superficially inimical to the rumbustious libertarianism that gives an underlying inherent shapeliness to even the silliest-seeming plot turns and utterances of the Niven/Pournelle team in their role as sf fictioneers. And if they had stopped with this first volume, it is pretty unlikely that anyone would have been the wiser; very few readers of libertarian persuasion, for instance, certainly not the entrepreneurs who have funded the Parks movement, could have found the 1987 novel of much practical interest.

This may be because of the conceptual lack of clarity of *Legacy of Heorot*. As commentators have often pointed out, the philosophy of libertarianism is particularly attractive to middle-class professionals, both men and women, not because it is designed to save them tax money (though that is surely an inducement), but because of its logical clarity. It's like experiencing a conversion on the road to Damascus, it's like catnip. Now I understand: it's so *simple*, murmurs the libertarian on opening his eyes again (unlike Pierce Moffatt, who says *I see* when the world, suddenly lit from within, blazes forth its own true complexity); Now I see it all. It's *simple*. Professionals—who are often freelance; who are relatively unprotected therefore by governments whose insolent lifestimesalarimen nevertheless persecute them with a pettifoggery of circumbendibus; who tend to be divorced, and who consequently feel harassed by living personifications of the life left behind, ex-wife night-mares out of the dead past with the law on *their* side; who tend to undergo sexual and midlife crises because they as much as half-understand themselves—are ideal victims of clarity. And they love Stories. Libertarianism is not only a dream of unshackling. Because of the truly enormous consequences upon the early 21st century world of acting out the dream of autonomy, libertarianism is also a profound generator of Story. No professional could be a libertarian in 2004, in other words, without the power to confabulate.



We return to the insight which governs *Heorot*. Remember the shaped biota; remember the characters of the story, who have a fantasy-game-like simplicity about them, as though each of them constituted a set of instructions for being; remember the story itself, in which huge numbers of brain-damaged supernumeraries die in the maws of ravening autochthones whose unutterably complex metamorphoses also exhibit, beneath all the shenanigans, a fantasy-game-like simplicity; remember all this, and understand that Avalon is, in embryo, as we have already said, an all but perfect Park. It is perfect because it is a *game*. It is perfect because it allows certain protagonists a sense of freedom, a sense that the world has been cleansed of ex-wives and untermenschen; but is in fact safely and utterly *controlled* for *members*.

The next volume, which was also by the limited Niven/Pournelle/Barnes team, was *The Dragons of Heorot* (1995), and did little but add a few more trap doors and duck blinds to the constructed world—though of course this pointed in the right direction. The Telluride dream was surely aborning already, in the hearts if not the minds of the threesome. Who knows, all the same, whether or not the admittedly ageing trio could have taken the imaginative leap embodied in last year's climactic and (as we've noted) controversial *Heorot Park*, which was of course composed by the full team: John Barnes, Steven Barnes, Newt Gingrich, Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle. Of the five, it is almost certainly Gingrich who has been central to the success of the tale. Its astonishing vitality derives largely, after all, from the sexual explicitness of *Heorot Park's* depiction of the inter-species mating ritual of grendels—the mature form of Avalon's autochthonous race which (as it turns out) only *pretends* to attack the humans who are destroying its habitat. The revelation that grendel assaults are a form of courtship, and that the genocidal feeding frenzy of the invading humans is understood by grendels to be a form of flattering *arousal*, may have been conceived by Niven, and the ceremonial head-dress worn by grendels on their wedding flight has all the marks of a Pournelle insight into the regimental aspects of fornication, but the intense and almost visceral clarity of the telling of the coming together of human males and grendel females in the act of love bespeaks a new hand on the tiller.

That is of course not the whole of it. When the newlyweds make their wedding journey to Earth, and view the shocking conditions here, and with unstoppable robust no-nonsense do-it-ability *harrow* from the land of the living the unfit and the unclean of America in order to gain lebensraum for the Great Game of Man and Grendel, an almost Swiftian terribilita raises the narrative to more than biblical heights. Delicious are the scenes in which Manhattan burns like a cigar between the lips of a God Who is not afraid to inhale. As depicted in the final chapters of this novel, the wrath of grendels, and of the men who fuck them with the wind in their hair, can stand as an emblem of a frank libertarian need for clarity. No, there is nothing Politically Correct about the team of Barnes, Barnes, Gingrich, Niven and Pournelle! And the enormous success the tale has enjoyed in some quarters must surely derive in part from the unswervingness—like water from a deep mountain spring—that marks the passages in which the slate is wiped clean. *Heorot Park* closes on a world without cross.



In the real world, of course, it is not so simple, and the Park Movement appeals to those men and women of distinction who understand the need for permanent retreats from an ecosystem and welfare state (for many professionals in mid-life, the two terms seem almost synonymous) nearing collapse. The mountain kingdom of Telluride—stocked as it is with simulacra of dragons whose catnip it is to be fucked by humans—is a ruritania fit for kings. Myself, I speak corpse century, and my card won't swipe at the gate to the community in the uplands. But you go, children. Vale. Fast now. It's Hell if you look back.

—John Clute



Monique was a moldie: an artificial life form made of a soft plastic that was mottled and veined with gene-tweaked molds and algae. Although Monique was a being with superhuman powers, she was working as maid, handyman, and bookkeeper for the Clearlight Terrace Court Motel in Santa Cruz, California. The motel manager, young Terri Stagnaro, occasionally worried about Monique's motives. But the moldie's work was affordable and excellent.

The Clearlight was situated near the top of a small hill, fifty yards back from the Santa Cruz beach with its Boardwalk amusement park. It was a fine fall day, and the morning sun filled Santa Cruz with a dancing, preternatural light that made the air itself seem jellied and alive. The date was Friday, October 31, 2053. On the ocean, long smooth waves were rolling in, each wave breaking with a luscious, drawn-out crunch.

The motel consisted of a wooden office and three terraced rows of

# the loonies need you by rudy rucker

connected  
stucco rooms, each  
room with a double sliding  
glass door looking out over the sea.  
Pasted onto part of each room's door was a translucent  
psychedelic sticker mimicking an arabesque tiling. The  
weathered motel office sat on a flat spot behind the  
highest terrace. The back part of the office held a four-  
room apartment in which Terri lived with her husband  
Tre Dietz and their two children: four-year-old Dolf and  
one-year-old Baby Wren.

Monique was making her way from room to room, changing the sheets and towels, enjoying the feel of the bright sun slanting down on her and on the faded blue walls of the motel buildings. She'd already finished the rooms in the two upper rows, and was now busy with the rooms of the lowest terrace, which sat directly above the well-worn shops of Beach Street. It was almost time for Monique's midday break; as soon as her husband Xlotl called up, she'd go down for an hour on the beach with him.

Monique looked like a woman, sort of, most of the time, which is why it was customary to refer to her as a she. Moldies picked a gender at birth, and stuck to it throughout the few years that they lived. Though arbitrarily determined, a moldie's sex was a very real concept to other moldies.

Each moldie was passionately interested in







mating and reproducing at least once before his or her short life should expire. The moldies reproduced in pairs, and lived in nests that were like extended families. Monique was in a nest of six: herself, her parents Andrea and Everooze, her husband Xlotl, her brother Xanana, and Xanana's wife Ouish.

Monique's mother Andrea was very strange. Sometimes, under the influence of certain chelated rare-earth polymers, she would form her body into a giant replica of the Koran or of the Book of Mormon, and lie out in front of the beachfront Boardwalk amusement park, babbling about transfinite levels of heaven, chaotic feedback, and the angels Izra'il and Moroni. Her body was more mold than plastic, and it looked like she might fall apart anytime now, but Andrea had gotten rejuvenation treatments for herself before, and she planned to do it again, if she could get the money.

Monique's father Everooze worked as a liveboard for Terri Stagnaro's kid brother Ike, who ran a surf-shop called Da Kine, out at Pleasure Point in south Santa Cruz. When Terri had heard about Monique's birth to Everooze and Andrea—last August—she'd right away thought of hiring the newborn moldie, and she'd been able to convince Andrea and Everooze that it was a floatin' idea.

Monique quickly learned the ins and outs of running the Clearlight, and her diligent efforts left Terri and Tre plenty of free time. Not only did Monique make up the rooms quickly and beautifully, she managed all of the motel's books.

With Monique in their employ, Tre and Terri's motel responsibilities amounted to little more than providing a human interface for the guests to interact with. They needed to be there to buffer new arrivals from the unsettling sight and smell of Monique.

The guests, always tourists, usually middle-class and midwestern, came to Santa Cruz because of its low prices, but were often a bit surprised at its interracial atmosphere. There weren't very many moldies in the heartlands, for the people there hated them—many midwesterners were heritagists. The common heritagist term for burning a moldie in a puddle of grain alcohol was "fryin' up an Iowa chop." "With truffle sauce," people would add sometimes, referring to the deep-buried nuggets of camote fungus that would crisp up as a moldie's twitching plastic disintegrated into the flames, sending off psychedellic clouds of blackened spores.

It was up to Terri and Tre to put the guests at ease in the free zone of Santa Cruz, and to make them feel that Santa Cruz wasn't threatening, even though the town was filled with students, moldies, Mexicans, surfers, and homeless stoners. But, yes, prices were low, and there were a lot of entertaining things to do.

Monique's husband Xlotl worked at Los Trancos Taco Bar, just down the hill from the Clearlight. As well as chopping the vegetables and cleaning the kitchen, Xlotl maintained the tank in which the meats used for the tacos were grown. The tank contained four perpetually self-renewing loaves of meat: chicken, beef, pork, and wendy—wendy being the human-cloned flesh which had taken such a hold on people's palates in recent months.

Pulling clean sheets off her cart for room 3B on the sunny morn of Halloween, 2053, Monique resembled a short, Indian-blooded Mexican woman. Her skin was a coppery orange, with irregular veins of green and blue lichen just below the surface. Rather than forking into legs, her lower body was a solid tapering mass that fluted out into a broad bottom disk—Monique was shaped more or less like a chess piece with arms. The exact appearance of her humanoid head and arms was something she could tweak according to the realtime situation. But when Monique relaxed, like now, she looked Hispanic.

Monique's disk-shaped plastic foot had ridges on the bottom, piezoplastic imipolex ridges that could ripplingly glide Monique across level surfaces. For more rapid progress, or on irregular terrain, Monique could hop like a chess knight. If the utmost speed was called for, she could flip her body out of the "chess piece" mode and go over into another of her body's stable attractor modes, a mode in which she could fly. In this alternate "pelican" mode, Monique became a set of great, flapping wings attached to a tapered, big-eyed body that resembled the great brown birds who dive for fish along the Santa Cruz coast.

Monique's tissues had at least three other basic attractor modes as well: the spread-out "puddle" shape she used for soaking up sun, the sea-going "shark" shape, and the rarely used "rocket" shape that moldies could use to fly between the Earth and the Moon, not that a moldie like Monique had any desire to go to the Moon with its crazed loonie culture of outlaw moldies.

The changes between modes could happen quite abruptly. Imagine being able to change your body into a rug or a bird or a fish or a spaceship simply by pretzelling yourself into a peculiar yoga position. Moldies could!

The pelican shape was Monique's favorite. There was nothing Monique enjoyed more than gliding high in the sky above the cliffs and the crashing sea of Monterey Bay, with the algae in

*the puddle shape she used for soaking up the sun*

her wings feasting on the im-partially free energy of the sun.

She'd been out flying with Andrea and Xlotl yesterday, in fact. But now today here Monique was, cleaning rooms and keeping the books for a fleshier motel. It was fully a xoxox bummer, and all just to have a baby?

There was a rapping noise from room 3D, two doors down. A thin, white-haired man with papery skin was standing behind the sliding door and knocking on the glass with his ring, one of those heavy high-school rings with a hollow, or hologram, of a rose or a skull or a school mascot inside the cheaply doped stone. The man gestured for Monique to come into his room. He wore a plastic white shirt and black slacks. Monique made a quick mental check of the registration records, and found that the man was named Randy Karl Tucker, and that he was occupying the room alone.

Monique jumped to the conclusion that



Tucker was a cheeseball, a person given to having sex with moldies. A cheeseball was not a high-class kind of person by any means. The name had to do with the fact that moldies didn't smell very good. Depending on the exact strains of fungi and algae which a given moldie incorporated, the smell might resemble mildewed socks or Brussels sprouts or an aggressively ripe cheese. The most noticeable component of Monique's sachet was a tangy iodine smell suggestive of the fecal black muck on the Santa Cruz harbor floor.

It went without saying that a moldie's intelligent, malleable flesh could provide a very unique multi-pronged personal massage for those humans who sought sex without love. The unnaturalness of the act was of appeal to certain individuals; indeed the very reek of a moldie was something which most cheeseballs found powerfully arousing. Sad to say for the men of this world, cheeseballs were almost always male.

Behind the glass door of room 3D, Tucker formed a cozening, humorless smile and winked at Monique. He had p r o -

*cheeseballs aroused by the reek of a moldie*

minent cheekbones and thin lips; he wore his white hair brushed straight back. The sly, insistent way that he kept crooking his finger made it seem almost certain that he was a cheeseball.

As it happened, when Monique, Xlotl, and Andrea had been out flying yesterday, Andrea had told the younger moldies about cheeseballs. Andrea had some very definite ideas about how to deal with them.

"Persuade the cheeseball to accompany you to an isolated setting," intoned Andrea, who'd recently started talking like a computer geek or, of all things, a robot. In the past she'd used the gaseous verbiage of the King James Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Koran, but these days she modelled her speech patterns on the style of science journals. "Encourage the cheeseball to initiate mating behavior, and then apply genital stimulation until the cheeseball is thoroughly distracted. At this point extrude a long tendril from your body mass and use rapid, decisive motions to encircle the cheeseball's neck with the tendril. Immediately tighten the tendril in the fashion of a noose so as to produce a cessation in the cheeseball's respiration."

"You choke him to death? You just snuff him pronto?" asked Xlotl. Each moldie based its speech patterns on some different data base. While Andrea had filled herself with science writing, Xlotl had steeped himself in hard-boiled detective novels and gangster film noirs.

"By no means," said Andrea. "The goal is to render him unconscious so that you can operate on his brain. During the interval that you are constricting his throat, you must monitor his pulse, taking care that it does not become too slow or too irregular. Allow him to respire small amounts of air as needed. Meanwhile you elongate your tendril and insert its tip into his left nostril."

"Eeew," said Monique. "Guh-ross. I mean

like what's in his nose?" She had modelled her speech on the bubbly, questioning, Valley Girl slang of the late twentieth century. They were hovering on the thermals off the cliffs north of Santa Cruz, all three of them snapped into pelican mode, talking in the shrill compressed chirps of encrypted sound that moldies could use to speak with each other. The moldies were like great birds, squawking high above the crawling, wrinkled sea—yet to each other, they sounded like people talking.

"One of the weakest spots in a flesher's skull is the upper nasal sinus," old Andrea explained. "Adjacent to the ocular orbit. This is where you must punch through with your tendril. At this point you will have free access to his brain. And you give him a thinking cap."

"Cripes! A brain control!" exclaimed Xlotl.

"Your thinking cap will live in his skull like the pith on a nut in its hull," said Andrea, cackling and flapping her wings. "The cap functions as an I/O port, or like an internal uvvy. Once he has your thinking cap, the cheeseball is your peripheral device."

"This sounds like totally hard, Andrea," said anxious Monique. "I'd be freakin'. What if I don't choke him enough? And then I forget where's the weak spot? I am not so sure. And how am I supposed to know how to like hook a thinking cap into some pervo flesher's brain?"

"Come here, children," said Andrea. "In order that I can give you copies of the full specs for a human brain interface. Make a physical contact with me for direct transmission."

The three soaring pelicans brushed wings, and Andrea downloaded a petabyte of information each into Monique and Xlotl's bodies. Thanks to the conductive polymers which filled their plastic tissues, moldies could communicate electromagnetically as well as by sound.

"Andrea have you like ever really done it? Tell me true," sang Monique after storing the info.

"Yes, I have given thinking caps to two cheeseballs in the past," said Andrea. "I refer of course to Spike Kimball and Abdul Quayoom—of whom I have often spoken. As my servants, these men left their families and their old lives. All of their assets and possessions were liquidated, with the full proceeds being given to me. By use of these resources, I have been able to purchase rejuvenation treatments as well as to buy the imipolex necessary to bring you and Xanana into the world, Monique. At this point, of course, Kimball and Quayoom have followed their death-angels Moroni and Izra'il into the beyond."

Spike Kimball had been a muscular Mormon missionary who'd asked Monique for sex three years ago, and Abdul Quayoom had been an Islamic rug programmer who'd approached Andrea three years before that. If they'd been smarter, instead of trying to have sex with Andrea, they would have burned her in a puddle of alcohol.

"I directed them each to swim straight out to sea one night until they were sufficiently exhausted to be able to drown," continued Andrea. "And then I had each thinking cap crawl out from the drowned man's nose and swim like a fish to meet me, waiting upon the shore."



"Oh that's cold," said Monique.

"Many fleshers would treat us with equal severity," said Andrea primly. "And remember, dear Monique, it is only by these means that I was able to acquire sufficient resources to both prolong my own life and also bring forth children such you. Would you deny your own mother the chance to rejuvenate herself? Moldie flesh is exorbitantly precious. Certainly you wouldn't want to stoop to victimizing other moldies instead of fleshers. I've heard that's what the loonies do. You wouldn't want to be like them."

Monique kept all these words in her heart, and when the white-haired cheeseball solicited her from the door of room 3D, she started thinking about giving him a thinking cap—thinking a mile a minute. Should she?

Could she? Dare she try?

Just then

tendrils in a sexual pushing deeper embrace

Xlotl's voice spoke up in Monique's head.

"Time for lunch break, baby.

Meet me down at the beach?" The Los Trancos Taco Bar liked Xlotl to take an hour or more off around noon, so that his stench wouldn't repel people wanting to have lunch.

"Totally," thought back Monique. "There's something I want to discuss with you." The encrypted uvvy link they used to talk to each other was not secure enough to broach the subject of thinking caps. Due to the irredeemable promiscuity of electromagnetic radiation, no uvvy link could be secure enough for planning murder.

Monique waved enticingly to the cheeseball behind his green-and-red stickered window-glass, then flounced down the stairs to Beach Street.

A moldie-bus full of tourists went quietly pattering past, followed by five moldies acting as rickshaws and carrying individual people. Monique boinged around them, chirping hellos to the ones that she recognized, and then she was on the beach. Looking up the hill towards the Los Trancos Taco Bar, Monique could see her darling husband hopping towards her. Xlotl resembled his wife Monique—he was shaped like a coppery Aztec chess-knight with a mouth like a purple slash in his face.

He bounced right into Monique, whooping wildly, and they wrapped their arms around each other and went rolling down towards the water. They came to rest at surf's edge, and lay there writhing in a sexual embrace, each of them pushing branching tendrils deep and deeper into the other's body.

Monique loved the intimate sensation of having herself in Xlotl and Xlotl in her. They were linked up like fractal puzzle-pieces, with as much of their surfaces as possible in contact. In the deepest cracks of their linkage, their skins opened up so that their bodies could exchange small wet seeps of imipolex, carrying along cells of their symbiotic fungi and algae. The more often two moldies embraced in this sexual manner, the more their bodies came to resemble each other.

The pleasure of contact reached an intense crescendo—an orgasm, really—and then the moldies slipped into puddle shapes so that their algae could soak up as much sun as possible.

"Oh that was yummy," signed Monique. "We're getting so tight with each other, Xlotl. If we can buy the plastic, we'll be ready to have a baby soon."

"It's gonna take awhile to earn the dough, what with the crummy wages we're getting," chirped Xlotl cozily. "But we're having fun anyway, ain't we?" The foam lapped about them and Xlotl snuggled himself against Monique, making sure that they touched all along the edge that separated their two puddles. For a moment Monique slipped into sleep and started to dream. About whales. But then a bold wave splashed her and she was back awake. Something was wrong . . . oh yes.

"Xlotl, omigod, I forgot to tell you! This cheeseball in Room 3D is like coming on to me?"

"Go on in there and take him for every cent he's worth, Momo. Andrea taught us how to do it yesterday."

"I'm scared. And, Xlotl, don't you think it's a negative thing to trash a dook's brain and then make him like die? I mean of course it's only a flesher . . . but don't you ever flash that information is sacred? Even a flesher cheeseball's brain?"

"Honey, it balances out.

A dog is sacred, a DIM is sacred. Everything's sacred.

But with this mark's money we can have a child right away, and use our own money to get ourselves retrofits. Like Andrea does. Hell, we can have two,

three children and rejuvenate ourselves if your dook is well-fixed. All this fab moldie consciousness for the cost of one less flesher? I'd call that a net gain of information. Move in on him, baby!"

Monique and Xlotl laid back down in the shallow lapping surf, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the water. Xlotl formed a cavity in his flesh, filled it with water, and sprayed it up overhead like a fountain. Monique engulfed an even bigger amount of water and sprayed higher than him. Then break time was over and the two moldies shared a last intimate embrace.

Just then a little boy stopped to stare at Monique and Xlotl.

"Lookie, Paw, it's two moldies fucking!" he bawled. "I'll try and kill 'em!" The child picked up a stick and poked it into Xlotl. Hard. Xlotl pinched off his skin around the puncture before he lost much cell tissue, and then he twisted around so that he flipped into the shape of an angry chessman, with the stick still protruding from his chest.

"You want me to bust your sack for good, you twerp?" snarled Xlotl, rearing up like a six-foot nightmare centaur. He pushed the stick out of his flesh so hard that it flew past the boy's head like a viciously hurled boomerang.

The kid took off crying, only to return a moment later with his father in tow.

"What are you scummy moldies doing out here?" asked the man. Monique jumped up into her chess-piece mode as well.

"This is a public beach, dook," said Xlotl. "And we're citizens."



"Hell you are," said the man, not drawing any closer. He was balding and paunchy, with sunburnt pale skin. "You leave my kid alone or else." He turned and moved back off down the beach. The little boy followed his Dad, turning once to give Xlotl the finger.

"Fleshers," said Xlotl. "Why can't we ever get away from them? Couldn't we like kill them all?"

"It wouldn't work," said Monique. "You know that. You can't ever kill all of anything. And the ones left would try to exterminate us. They'd be doing it wholesale right now if it weren't for the Moldie Citizenship Act."

"Thank God for good old Senator Stahn. About this cheeseball situation. You ain't gonna punk out, are you? Get mad! Think about the kid who poked me."

"Maybe—why don't I go get a pep-talk from Mom. I think she said she was gonna get high and lie out in front of the Boardwalk today."

"Shaped like the Koran or like the Book of Mormon? Or like the fuckin' works of Shakespeare?"

"Like the Bible. Remember? Andrea's into Christianity these days. She's all—" laughing Monique threw back her head and delivered a pitch-perfect imitation of her mother's tones: "I am interested in a relationship with a God-fearing Christian man."

Xlotl nodded thoughtfully. "Andrea will get you to do the deed. If she don't take the job herself. I'll cool my heels at Los Trancos—with my uvvy tuned for you. Squawk if you need muscle."

"Wavy, darling. Wish me luck." Monique bounded down the beach and in a few minutes she drew even with the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, a classic wonderful seaside amusement park. All day long, the students, moldies, Mexicans, surfers, and homeless stoners of Santa Cruz streamed through the Boardwalk, diluting the valleys and heritagists enough so that the place was never whitebread dull. The Boardwalk was six blocks long and half a block thin. Despite the name, the grounds were paved with concrete.

On the sidewalk outside the Boardwalk was Monique's mother Andrea, spread softly out on the pavement like a giant Colorado River toad, but a toad in the shape of a giant book lying open on the ground. The Good Book. Big gothic letters scrolled across the two exposed pages. Just now the letters read, Thou Shalt Not Hate Moldies.

"Moldies are sentient beings with genuine religious impulses," intoned Andrea. "I'm interested in pursuing a dialogue on this issue. Especially with single men!"

"Mom," said Monique in an encrypted chirp. "One of these days a heritagist tourist is going to pour alcohol on you and light you. A lot of heritagists are Christians. Do you really think they dig seeing you like imitate their sacred book?"

"Greetings, Monique," squawked Andrea cheerfully. "I am in an ecstatic state of consciousness today. A potent ytterbium-twist compound was provided to me this morning by cousin Emuline. What an exceedingly pleasant day it is! Are you here to make a request of me?"

"I wanted to fab about this cheeseball who's

after me? I'm trying to get stoked to give him a thinking cap."

"You can do it, Monique, you can!"

"I'm scared. And it seems wrong."

"Accept your sensations of fear, Monique, but don't let them dominate your behavior. Remember that your attack must be abrupt and decisive, otherwise—"

"Otherwise what?" asked Monique nervously.

"Cousin Emuline told me a rumor that someone is kidnapping moldies. We think it's the loonies. They make moldies helpless with something called a dream-DIM."

"What's that?"

"You know how normally you can't dream unless you're completely quiet and comfortable and cozy in the nest? Functionally asleep? That's because we moldies have an oneiric, or dream-logic, operating system that only kicks when things are safe and there's plenty of time for woolgathering and chaotic simulation."

"Yaar," said Monique. "I dreamed on the beach for a few seconds just now. It felt good. But if I'd stayed asleep much longer . . ."

"A fleshier would have attacked you," said Andrea. "Exactly. But this dream-DIM is apparently a computational patch that gives unconditional control to a moldie's oneiric system so she don't know what she's doing. Emuline says that's what the kidnappers are using."

Three well-dressed California tourists had stopped to stare at Andrea. They were a yuppie mother, father and daughter.

"What's that thing supposed to be?" asked the mother.

"I am the Bible," said Andrea in a sweet, reasonable voice. "The Good Book of your Saviour. I'm interested in pursuing a dialogue on religious issues."

"Look, it has writing on it," said the little girl. "It says, 'Love Thy Moldie As Thyself.'"

"Don't get close to it," cautioned the father. "It might try and get something

from you. Everything that has anything to do with religion sucks, Susie. You might as well know that right now. Let's go look at the rides." They wandered off.

"Why do you do this anyway, Andrea?" asked Monique.

"To foster an enhanced peace and understanding between the species, my child. And to meet a cheeseball Christian man whom I can rob and kill."

"Well, I think you're crazy."

"The Bible says, 'Honor thy father and mother,'" said Andrea. "Which is not wholly a meaningless concept. Now you go and do what you're supposed to do. And use extreme caution, in case the story about the kidnappers is true."

Andrea flipped a few pages of her bible body and called out a greeting to another group of tourists. They ignored her and walked on.

*WE moldies have an oneiric operating system*



"Has it every occurred to you that everything is alive, my child?" mused Andrea. "Information is everywhere. Information rains down upon us from the heavens in the form of cosmic rays. In my exalted mental state I can feel them. Oooh. Ummm. Ooooh. Aaaaaah."

"Mom, are you sure that rare-earth stuff isn't bad for you?"

"All known life-processes end in death, Monique. In an information-theoretic sense, becoming repetitious is like dying even before your body goes. You have to trade off some risk to your body in order to enhance the action of the mind. And in your case, you have a very dangerous and very specific mission for today. Don't avoid it."

"Wavy, floatin', I'll go for it. Bye."

Back up on the lower walkway of the Clearlight Terrace Court Motel, there was no visible action in Room 3D. But Monique had a feeling that her cheeseball was still in there.

She stretched her neck out backwards over the balcony like a comic book Plastic Man, looking to make sure that Tre or Terri weren't in sight. Thanks to the contractible polymers in her piezoelectric imipolex body, Monique could stretch and bend at will—although it took a lot of energy to stay in any position other than one of her stable attractor modes such as the chess piece or the pelican.

There was no sign of Tre or Terri. Terri had probably gone out surfing, leaving Tre in the office playing with his chaotic computations.

Monique glided over to Randy Karl Tucker's door and knocked. He opened it, and Monique mamboed on in. The room smelled like Tucker's hair-tonic. Tucker's uvvy was sitting on his desk, projecting a hollow of a pornographic soap opera.

"Yaar there," said Monique, synthesizing the sounds on a fluttering membrane near the back of her mouth cavity. "I saw you waving to me before? Is there something I can like do for you?"

Tucker's thin mouth lengthened in a sly, lustful smile. "I knowed you'd come back, that's why I been settin' here a-waitin'. Just close the door to begin with, you little stinker. And pull the drapes. Before we start a-carryin' on." He was clean-shaven, and his eyes were flat and gray. Two women on the porno soap were arguing over a boyfriend.

"I'm not sure I can help you, sir," said knowing Monique, sliding the door closed and pulling the curtain across it. "Terri Stagnaro, she's the manager here, she was just telling me this morning that it's not proper for me to have any kind of intimacy with the guests. The Clearlight Terrace Court Motel is a place for wholesome family fun. Those were Terri's exact words." Monique set her arms akimbo, flexed the erectile tissues of her breast-mounds, and waggled the hiplike swelling below her waist. "So um like what is it that you want from me, farmboy?" She pouted out her lips and giggled.

"I . . ." Moving as stagily as one of the actors on the soap, Tucker paused to take a slurp from a cardboard cup of coffee printed with the logo of the Daffo Deli down on Beach Street. He looked solemnly up from his cup, only to lose his

composure and break into a cackle at Monique's beckoning gyrations, for now Monique was milling her arms and flinging them out like a pom-pom cheerleader.

"You're a peppy hunk 'o cheese, ain't you," said Tucker. "To hell with what your boss says. You show me a good time, and I'll pay you plenty."

Monique undulated forward across the motel room's carpeted floor, standing right up against the man, opening her skin-fissures to release a yet headier mixture of her bouquet. "Can you authorize a charge to your account now, Randy?"

"How?"

"I'm the bookkeeper as well as the maid, Mr. Tucker. Will you authorize the charge?" Monique reached out and undid one of the buttons of his long-sleeved white plastic shirt. His gray pants and black plastic belt were as cheap-looking as the shirt. His thinning hair was oiled to look thicker than it was. His skin was pale white, and Monique could see his faintly pulsing blue veins beneath the skin's surface. His nose was a bit crooked, as if it had been broken a few times.

"Um, all right," the man mumbled reluctantly. "But put it down as, as . . ."

"I'll just average it into your like room-rate?" said Monique. "It won't show. But you have to come out and say just what it is that you want me to do." Monique smiled hugely and released a cloud of spores. "So that you can't frame me for prostitution. In case you're a like heritagist? So now please tell me what you want, Randy."

"I want you to blow me, dammit. And what's wrong with heritagists, anyway?"

"That's what you are?"

"I ain't sayin' I hold with all their beliefs. But I knows plenty of heritagists back in Louisville. Right good people, most of 'em."

"What would they think about your wanting

t o

h a v e

sex with a  
moldie?"

Tucker's face

reddened. "They'd

think it was wrong. And it is

wrong. But—I'm a peculiar man, and I got my needs. Can we git started now?"

"Love to," said Monique dryly. She finished unbuttoning Randy's shirt, and now she undid his pants. She paused, looking at him. He was tall and rangy, with a fair amount of muscle. She was going to have to be sure to get a tight choke-hold on him when she went up his nose and punched into his cranium.

Now he lay back on his bed, and Monique pressed against him, letting her tissues flow and reshape to mold themselves so as to fully envelop Randy's private parts. Sexually, it meant no more to her than pushing a wheelbarrow would mean to a human. Monique set up some caressing rhythms, trying to rock the weight up to speed.

While Tucker wheezed and twitched in mounting excitement, Monique set her right

*information rains down  
on us from the heavens*



forefinger to growing like a vine. She twined it up along Tucker's torso and wrapped it once around his neck.

Feeling leery of starting to choke Tucker right away, Monique went ahead and slid the tip of her four-foot-long finger into Tucker's nose, at the same time setting some chaotic ripples onto his genitals. But now, instead of lying back in blind ecstasy, Tucker suddenly sat up and started clawing at his face and neck.

"What the hell you think you're doin' in my nose, bitch? Thought you'd give me a thinking cap, didn't you!"

Monique tightened herself around his neck as much as possible and punched her tendril with all her might against the spot high up at the back of Tucker's nose. But it wouldn't give! She punched and punched again, but it was like Tucker's skull was patched with

titaniplast or something—  
Monique couldn't get in!

And now Tucker  
had wormed his  
right hand  
between

he yanked  
and started her tendril out  
kicking

Monique's  
noose and his  
throat, and she couldn't  
choke him anymore. With  
his left hand, he yanked  
Monique's tendril out of his nose.  
He got to his feet and started kicking at  
Monique's body. Monique squeezed his  
testicles so hard that he screamed and fell  
sideways, crashing into the desk and plopping the  
uvvy and its holograms to the floor. This was turning  
into a full-scale disaster. If Monique ran off now,  
Tucker would tell people about Monique's attack on  
him and she'd be hunted down and exterminated. She  
had to finish him off!

Tucker was on his back now, and Monique was on  
his nude body like a savage vampire slug. There was  
a fight scene playing on the hollows too, which  
seemed to be drowning out Tucker's cries so far. Or  
maybe all the people in the nearby rooms were out  
on the beach where they belonged, instead of lurking  
inside waiting to have sex with a moldie like this  
skungy heritagist bastard—

Tucker had his left hand in the bottom drawer of  
the desk now, fumbling for something. A gun? A  
gun couldn't hurt a moldie. With his left arm out of  
the way, Monique was free to shove a fat tendril  
down his throat. She'd been on the point of calling  
Xlotl for help, but now she was sure she was going  
to win. There was a good weak spot in the skull  
right behind the roof of the flesher's mouth, and it  
wasn't armored like the spot in his nose. Bye,  
flesher. But just as Monique began to push,  
Tucker slapped his hand against her side  
and—everything changed.

Instead of being in Room 3D on top of the  
struggling Randy Tucker, Monique felt herself to  
be on a beach, the longest, widest beach she'd  
ever seen. Her body was the shape of a  
surfboard, like Everooze, and she was worming  
herself up over a huge, wave-shaped sand dune,  
trying to get a clear view of the sea. Someone  
was next to her, someone she couldn't clearly  
see, a moldie who spoke directly to her

thoughts.

"The waves are special today," the other  
moldie said, and now, finally reaching the top  
of the dune, Monique could see. The whole  
seabed lay uncovered, with gasping fish lying  
on their sides, and octopuses slithering about,  
and great windrows of kelp filled with starfish  
of every color. Out at the far horizon was a line  
as if of battlements, a monster tidal wave  
gathering its force.

Monique and her companion humped their  
way rapidly down the side of the dune and began  
flopping across the exposed kelp, scrambling to  
get out into position for the monster wave.  
Following along behind them was their enemy, a  
leering skinny white man, and no matter how hard  
and fast they hurried, the enemy was right behind  
them.

And then the other moldie embraced Monique  
and they leaped ahead, finally fast enough to leave  
the man behind, they lunged forward to meet the  
giant wave. It broke all around Monique in a  
dizzying explosion of color and light. A whirlwind  
of pure energy boiled around her and through her. In

the boiling she forgot herself  
entirely for a time.

And then she was awake,  
her old self, only not quite, for  
she was wedged in with a mass of  
other moldies, with other crankily  
waking kidnapped moldies like herself.

She managed to push out an eyestalk to  
see where they were—they were high in space,  
rocketing away from the heartbreakingly lovely orb of  
mother Earth.

"Greetings," came an uvvy voice. "My name is  
Blaster. You mudder dooks are getting a fresh start.  
You're coming to the moon to join your forefathers. And  
stop that grumblin'. The loonies need you, your minds  
as well as your bodies. You come to join us as equals."

"Xlotl," called Monique into the group uvvy mind of  
Blaster and the other shanghaied moldies. "Is Xlotl  
here?"

"Yeah babe," came the happy answer. "I swam after  
you and Randy Tucker. He used a boat to carry you out a  
mile offshore and tossed you into a giant group moldie  
floating there like a jellyfish. Then it lashed out and got  
me too. When I saw it had you, I . . . I wanted it to get me.  
And then it formed itself into a rocket and blasted off.  
We're going to the Moon. Where there's no fuckin' air or  
water."

"You'll like it anyway," said Blaster's big voice. "We've  
got a huge underground nest with no fleshers. We need you,  
and not just to be a maid or a cook."

Monique squirmed through the massed moldies to be at  
her Xlotl's side.

"Whaddya think, Monique?"

"It might work, Xlotl. A new start. I'm willing to try."  
The rocket pushed forward, leaving Earth behind.

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# Bluebeard

~ by Piers Anthony ~

**I** stepped into my Interact identity. It was Females Day on the Zone, meaning that there would be no charges of any kind for female players in certain games. That meant no permanent record, and that was just as important to a girl as the money.

I zeroed in on the ad I had heard about next to the Junior Miss Games section. Maybe that was just coincidence, or maybe the game sponsors figured that today's junior was tomorrow's adult, so they were cultivating a future market. Naturally such a game would be fascinating to a child of any age. It was obviously based on a fairy tale, though of course the details would be changed, to make it a worthwhile challenge.

There it was: "BlueBeard." I felt the tingle of spine that such a notion evokes in a girl. Bluebeard was a rich noble who married seven women in turn. When he took business trips, he told them they could go anywhere in the castle except one room. Of course each wife sneaked a peek at the forbidden chamber—and spied the bodies of her predecessors. Until Wife #7 managed to escape and expose the rascal. It was a story stronger in mystery than in sense. Nobody ever missed those other six wives? What about the stench of their corpses? Why didn't Bluebeard hide the bodies where they couldn't be so readily found? So there would be a forbidden chamber in the game, but no dead wives; it had to be something else. And there was the fascination: what was in there? The only way to find out was to play the game.

I moved my electronic marker to knock on the castle door. A panel opened, showing a grim face. "Go away!" it said sociably, and the panel started to close.

"But I came to play!" I protested, my spoken words appearing as print along the bottom of the screen. If I changed my mind, I could edit them out before I spoke again. Of course I didn't do that. No girl would, at this stage.

The grim face scowled. "You are too young. You look like a ten year old child. You can't marry Bluebeard until you are at least eighteen." The panel started to close again.

"I'm at least eighteen!" I cried hastily. "I'm—I'm using my little sister Nettie's membership. She said it's all right. Since this is Females' Day, I won't be running up any charges on her account."

"You should get your own account, registered in your name and age," the face said. "Come back when you do. There'll be another Females' Day next month."

"But this is my only day off!" I protested frantically. "I'll be too busy then. And why get a whole

membership when I won't be playing much anyway? Why should you care whose name it's in, since it's free today anyway?"

He stared at my emulation figure. "Eighteen—in a ten year old persona. It's highly irregular—"

"But people do it all the time, don't they?" I pleaded. "Just let me in, and I won't say a thing. I just want to play the game."

He finally relented. "You swear you are eighteen or over? That you are adult, and qualified to play an adult game? And you know that this *is* an adult game?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" I agreed eagerly, answering each question, as any girl of ten would.

"Then enter, Nettie," he said, and the heavy oaken door swung slowly inward to reveal the dark interior hall.

**I** entered, relieved that they had accepted my word instead of doing the thorough verification of my identity the law required. The one that would have shown that there was only one child in my family, so there couldn't be any older sister. The stats were on record from the original application for membership in Interact, the worldwide electronic entertainment network. But maybe they didn't care, since the charge meter was turned off; there would be no permanent record of this transaction. Females' Day was really a way to get more women into what had been a mostly male dominion. Monthly free samples to get new folk hooked, so they would become game addicts and be willing to pay endlessly for the privilege. Some games were extremely expensive, but those who were hooked had no choice except to pay. Why worry if they were underaged, any more than the erstwhile tobacco companies had worried about the targets of their advertising? Soon enough they would be of age, and addicted to the special thrills of electronic entertainment. In fact, maybe the tobacco companies owned electronic stock, since they knew so well how to nudge around and under and through the law. Free samples were seldom truly free; they were more like trial doses of heroin. I knew that—which was why I was here.

A maid met me in the anteroom. She held up a wedding dress. She looked doubtfully at me. "Are you of age to marry?" she asked. "Because—"

"Yes, yes," I said. "This is my little sister's persona, because I'm on her card. Just make the dress fit." Though I was surprised to encounter marriage; there had been no warning of this. Still, how could the Bluebeard scenario be played out without a wife? So





it did make sense, on reflection.

She put the wedding dress on me, and it did fit my small persona, because it was a one-size-fits-all costume. Computer simulations in virtual reality are handy that way; no fancy re-stitching is needed. She

set a tiara in my hair and showed me the mirror. I was now a lovely young (very young!) bride.

Music played as an inner door opened. I stepped through, and there was an aisle down the center of a chapel. At the far end was the altar with a priest, and



beside it stood a portly man with a massive blue beard. I was about to marry Bluebeard! I might have been daunted, as any girl would be, but reminded myself that the game was not reality; no ceremony was binding beyond the confines of the game itself. So I marched down the aisle, thrilling to the swell of the wedding march, a melody I had always liked.

I reached the altar, and the priest mumbled some words, and Bluebeard put a golden ring on my finger. By this time I was identifying completely with my persona, so the scene seemed real; suspension of disbelief becomes easier with practice. Then he kissed me, and I had to clamp down on my reactions lest I go into freakout mode. I mean, the groom does kiss the bride, doesn't he? Even if the groom has the universe's bushiest Technicolor beard and the bride's a ten year old girl. So I got through it, mainly by closing my eyes and pretending I was sucking on the world's fuzziest giant peach.



He took my hand and led me through another portal. Now we were in the castle bedroom, with fancy draperies at the stone windows and an enormous four poster bed. Oops—were we supposed to consummate the marriage? I really hadn't considered that detail. In the fairy tale book they always sort of slide over that sort of thing. Any girl would be wondering whether it was better to quit the game now, while she was ahead, so to speak. I hesitated.

Fortunately Bluebeard ignored the bed. "Wife, I have to make a business trip," he said gruffly. "Here are all the keys to the castle." He held up a huge ring. "You may go anywhere you choose, with one exception. Do not enter the chamber that this little key unlocks." He selected the smallest of all the keys. "Promise me you will not enter that one room."

Ah, we were getting into it! "I promise," I said, wondering what would have happened if I had refused to promise. Would the game have shorted out right there? That forbidden chamber was the whole point of it, after all.

"Good. I shall return in a fortnight." He handed me the keys, and tromped out of the bedroom door. In a moment the castle shook as he slammed the great outer portal. I looked out the window and saw his huge blue charger galloping away. He had effectively been written out of the game. I had two weeks to myself.

Naturally the first thing I did was head for the forbidden room. There were servants cleaning the halls and making beds, just as in a hotel. They were figments of the game's imagination, and I ignored them.

The forbidden door was easy to recognize. It had a big placard on it saying FORBIDDEN CHAMBER—DO NOT ENTER. So I put the key in its lock, and tried to turn it. It resisted.

The placard changed. ARE YOU SURE YOU ARE OF AGE? it printed at me.

"I'm using Nettie's card," I explained again. "I'm actually at least eighteen."

ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO DO THIS? YOU GAVE YOUR WORD.

I hesitated. This was actually the third time the game had challenged my age or motive. Apparently they were really serious about keeping children out. Yet all they had to do was run a routine check on my membership, a process requiring perhaps all of two seconds, and bounce me out of the game when I

couldn't document my age. So it seemed clear that they really didn't care. This was all window dressing.

"Yes, I'm sure," I said. I twisted the key again, and this time it turned. I heard the crude tumblers moving, unlocking the door.

The chamber was bare. The walls were not stone, but mirror glass, making it seem much larger than it was. There was only a chest the size and shape of a coffin lying in its center, reflected endlessly in the walls. This was the big secret?

I stepped inside—and the door slammed closed behind me. Oops—I had left the key in the lock. Now it and all the other keys on the ring were out of my reach. And the door had no handle inside. I had stupidly locked myself in. I would surely lose a point for that.

Of course I wasn't really confined. I could exit the game any time simply by lifting my real hands and removing the electronic helmet that brought me the sounds and sights of Interact. My gloves and socks were only to track my movements in the game; they didn't interfere with my real actions. But then I would default, and never find out what the big secret was. No curious girl would want that. I didn't care about winning the game; I just wanted to fathom its mystery.

So I walked my persona to the coffin and pulled on the handle on its lid. The lid swung up and back, forming a padded horizontal table. And in the depths of the coffin lay a handsome naked human man. No pointed elven ears, no vampire fangs, no nothing supernatural. There was no doubt of this, because everything was laid out to view.

"You're it?" I asked, disappointed.

"Aren't I enough?" He sat up, then lifted himself out of the coffin. He turned to bend over it, presenting me with his small bare masculine buns, and hauled the base up so that it snapped into a continuation of the padded table.

"That depends," I said. "You must be something really special, to be Forbidden."

"Of course I'm special," he said. "I have remarkable lust and stamina. Get that dress off and I'll demonstrate."

I realized that I was still in the wedding dress. "Uh, you're naked," I said somewhat belatedly.

"Indeed. Get naked yourself, and lie on this altar of erotic expression. You and I are about to have a memorable experience." He touched his genital, which lengthened.

I backed away, not easy with this. "I think I don't want to play anymore," I said.

The man fixed me with a disconcerting stare. "I think you will play my game, girl. You may call me Lucifer." His genital expanded ominously.



This was definitely alarming. I lifted my hands to the helmet, as any girl would. The helmet didn't show in the game, but the gesture was unmistakable.

"Listen, girl," he said. "You have forsworn yourself three times to reach this chamber. You claimed to be at least eighteen, when in fact you are only ten. The arrangement by which you entered this game has no validity, because of those misrepresentations. If you quit now, you will be charged with the crime of illicit entry. A penalty fee will be assigned, and you will be arraigned for disciplinary proceedings. Not only will your family



be impoverished by the assessment, you yourself may be removed from what is obviously an unsuitable home and assigned to a reform school for an indefinite period. Are you sure you want to let yourself in for that?"

I stared at him, dumbfounded as any girl would be. I did not speak, but neither did I continue my motion toward the helmet.

"You thought you couldn't get in trouble when no fees were charged?" he inquired rhetorically. "That no fees meant no records? Girl, those records are there regardless. They just aren't publicized. We can produce three game scenes showing your persona swearing that you are what you are not. You lied, girl, committing perjury, and thereby criminalized yourself. The law is now your enemy."

I found my voice. "But I only wanted to—"

"To go where you knew you were forbidden to go. To do what was forbidden. And you did. Now you are locked into your situation as surely as your persona is locked in this chamber. You can hardly claim you weren't warned."

I began to cry, as any girl would. "Please, I didn't mean any harm! I was just curious. Let me go, and I'll never tell."

Lucifer smiled. "Now we are making progress. I shall be glad to let you go, and to guarantee that no news of this is ever bruited about. Your secret is safe with me. If." He looked meaningfully at me.

I tried twice before I got the question out. "If—if what?"

"If you remove that dress and lie on this bed. There is no need for any of this to be unpleasant. Indeed, you should enjoy it."

"But—but you want me to—to—"

"Exactly." He fondled his member again, which was now enormous.

"But I'm only ten years old!" I wailed.

He shrugged. "So?"

"It—it's against the law."

**H**e laughed. "Let me clarify something for you, girl. What we do here is purely in simulation. There is no physical component. Neither of us is actually here. There is thus no violation of law. But what you have done *is* against the law. You lied to break into a game you knew was forbidden to you. You did it three times. You said you were of age, adult, and that you knew this was an adult game. And that you were sure you wished to play this game. You know that 'adult' is a code for sexual expression. You volunteered for this, girl. Now you will get what you wished—or face the penalties for your crime. It is your choice."

I stared at his erect member in the manner of a hapless bird at a snake. "You'll let me go? If I—?"

"I will let you go, with nothing on your record. No one will know, if you don't tell. It will be our secret."

Still I hesitated. "How can I be sure that—?"

"Certainty is impossible, of course. Still, if you please me, I shall have no reason to do you any mischief. I will simply go on to the next innocent girl."

"Why—why don't you get a—a woman? Wouldn't she be better? For what you want?"

"Grown women know too much. They are not innocent. Sex is just a process to them. They grow cynical. But a virginal child is something else. The experience is all the world to her. She will never for-

get it. That is what I crave: that first experience, that defloration of innocence. There is just nothing else like it."

"You—you *want* a child?" I asked, appalled. "Instead of a woman?"

"Yes. Now will you come to me, understanding the nature of the deal?"

"I—don't know," I said, my hands hovering near the helmet. "It's so awful!"

"I trust you have considered that you will be subjected to similar indignities in reform school," he said smoothly. "The main difference being that those are physical rather than merely in emulation. The male instructors take their pick of the girls or boys, who are completely in their power, and of course other girls have their tastes."

"Other girls?" I asked blankly.

"You can't escape them, in the barracks. I understand the perverts work in teams, if there is resistance. One holds you down, another pries your legs apart, while a third wields the—"

"No!" I screamed, clapping my hands over my ears.

But his words came through anyway, because the ears of a persona have no physical reality; like the rest of the images, its aspects are only for convenience of orientation. "I apologize for causing you discomfort, girl. I have no wish to appall you. I merely wish to be certain you understand the alternatives. Do you?"

**I** stood for a moment, my eyes blank. I shuddered. Then, slowly, I pulled off my fancy dress. Persona naked, I went to the bed and lay down on it. Lucifer didn't seem to mind that I was weeping continuously as he proceeded to do with my body what pleased him, indefatigably. It was all in simulation, but the mirrors made it quite clear what was happening in great variety. I couldn't close my eyes to it; he required me to look, to see every detail. If I looked away, he did it again, and again, until I watched. Because the sound and sight was all there was; if I didn't see it, I didn't react, and he wanted the reaction of a child. I had a total course in normal and aberrant sexual expression. Every time I tried to demur, faintly, as he perpetrated some new outrage, he said that it was almost done, and reminded me of the alternative, and I let it continue. It became a dullness, a series of scenes without meaning other than amazement, horror and disgust. I was almost beyond shock, and it showed—which what he wanted.

At last his disgusting passions were exhausted; he had acquainted the innocent girl with so much that she would never thereafter find any novelty in any sexual act. Nothing, pleasant or unpleasant, remained to be learned. He had, as he put it, thoroughly deflowered her innocence.

I got up, put my hands to my helmet, and lifted it off my head. The game scene vanished. I blinked, reorienting to reality as I tore off my gloves and socks. It was the bedroom of our house, and I stood beside our bed.

My husband left his portable electronic console and stepped toward me. "Are you all right? Some of the things you were saying—"

I held up a hand in a stop gesture. "Please don't touch me," I said. "It will be a while before I—before I'm ready for that. I'm still thinking somewhat like a ten year old girl, after making such an effort to identify with Nettie. Even as an adult, I found some of



it mind bending. That monster had notions I never dreamed of! They *knew* she was ten."

"They *wanted* underage girls? It wasn't just random?"

"And underage boys," I said, my disgust brimming. "Did you get it all?"

"Completely," he said. "Everything has been recorded. Every image, every word, every motion, every identity. I saw the indicators as we locked on to the perpetrators, thanks to this special equipment, and every member of the audience who paid to watch. I believe we shall have a clean sweep of this live action virtual porn ring, and no child will have to testify. The Interact white slavers will be finished. But of course I couldn't see the actual images while I made the electronic record. When you started crying I wasn't sure how much of it was acting. How bad was it?"

"Very bad," I said. "A dreadful tissue of hints, distortions, threats, and outright lies, yet fiendishly persuasive to a child. He led her on mercilessly, coercing her into cooperation. It could have destroyed Nettie. Children today may know more of life and sex than earlier generations ever did, but this—this is something else. Now we know why children have been committing suicide in such numbers."

"And with no record of anything untoward on the Interact," he said. "And to think how readily our daughter could have been the next. It was just our fortune that she had the wit to mention that ad for the Bluebeard game."

"And that we had the wit to be suspicious, and to contact the Interact proprietors, who were looking for

a way to verify *their* suspicions," I agreed. The numbness was gradually abating, though I knew that I would never be able to abolish every vestige of the horror of the virtual encounter. If I, a grown, experienced woman, had been halfway freaked out by those sexual acts, how much worse for a child! "So that we could set up this little sting operation."

"And that she was willing to let us use her game persona and identity, so they could verify her authenticity, and use it to blackmail her into submission," he said. Then he frowned. "If it's as bad as it evidently was, what about our deal with Nettie?"

I shuddered. "To let her view the full video recording? We can't do that! I hope she *never* sees some of those perversions."

"But what kind of parents are we, if we renege? We made a deal, and she honored her part of it. She would never forgive us."

"Oh, she'll forgive us," I reminded him wanly. "You are forgetting the escape clause."

He knocked his forehead with the heel of his hand. "That if we don't show her that video, we must pay a consequence of her choosing, without limit. We thought that was academic."

"Well, it isn't," I said. "We will suffer the consequence."

"What could a ten year old girl demand? A ton of ice cream? And end to all curfews? An annual pass to Mouse House?"

"Let's hope it's that innocent," I said, dreading it. Because Nettie had a diabolical imagination. Almost like that of Lucifer, in her fashion. We were in for it. ■

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When the Kollapse came Wirehead jumped to his feet, knocking over his stand of compact disks with a clatter. He picked up his Kollapse Kit 2.4, his own design, and slung it over his back. It weighed over twenty kilos—nobody on the Net used old fashioned English units—and he waddled heavily as he started directly for the front door of his family home.

In the street people were looking around in wonder, trying to figure out what to do. They murmured to each other, mere gossip and speculation, no real data.

He avoided their questions. If they had not prepared for this day, if they did not have the database to fathom how the threads of complexity in modern society could warp and buckle under the sheer stress of the modernity of it all, that was their problem.

He had said this many times on polisci.talk.com, one of the Net bulletin boards devoted to earnest and insightful discussions of just such possibilities—no, certainties, Wirehead reminded himself—as the Collapse. Or the Kollapse, as some of the more hip and aware guys on the Net called it.

He went back inside and took the extra set of keys to the family car from the secret place he had hidden them, right beside the car itself in the garage. He hit the button for the automatic garage door opener and nothing happened.

So the electrical grid had gone out already. Very well; that just verified one of his predictions in “Overture to the Krunch,” a piece he had written for Apocalypse.online.net over two years ago. It had even been excerpted in HotWired, the online magazine.

He pulled the release cord on the door opener and grunted as he heaved upward on the door handle. It slid up with a reverberating metallic clatter that sounded to Wirehead like the death rattle of civilization itself. He could hear his parents calling his name in the house but he ignored them, because of course they had no application now to the problems of this wholly new and transformed world.

Wirehead got into his father's car and backed out into the street. There was a change in the tenor of the background noises. People were shouting angrily,

others were simply alarmed, their cozy routines disturbed, the infinite buffet of services at an end. Pathetic voices, unable to deal with even so predictable a phenomenon as a power failure. Nineteenth century tech, yet most people did not understand even the rudiments of it.

He drove toward the east, which he had decided in his careful plans of several years before afforded the best escape route. In his rearview mirror—more exactly, in his father's, since Wirehead spent all his money on computer gear and Net online costs and had nothing left for lesser hardware like cars—he saw his parents come out of the house and begin to run after him.

They were both nearly fifty and therefore hopelessly mired in the thought patterns of the dead past. He stepped on the gas. The full-throated growl of the engine, another piece of antiquated tech but still

BY GREGORY BENFORD



useful, filled him with purpose. Soon his parents dwindled away in the rearview mirror even though they had begun running with surprising speed. His father lasted longer, though of course that came from the pointless sports his father had wasted time on instead of sharpening his computer skills. That was the old way and the Kollapse would sweep aside men like his father. His mother was just a woman. Neither would fit the world that was being born today.

As he left town he saw a lot of other people doing the same. How had his Tactic #1, "Escape from the disintegrating infrastructure," leaked out to the rabble? Probably some hacker breaking into his super secret personal computer files. He mentally tipped his hat—though of course no one he knew wore a hat, and those with caps wore them backwards—to the info-thief who had gotten past his digital snares and protocols.

But then he realized that no one could have gotten to his files because they were all on floppy disks, tucked right into his Kollapse Kit 2.4. No one could access them through the Net.

That meant that these people around him had devised the same tactic. A scowl crossed Wirehead's face, but he then reasoned that these mundanes would soon thin out. They were probably driving to take shelter with their relatives or some other antique notion. Time would prove their folly.

He had barely reached a wooded area before the car coughed and glided to a stop. A simple inspection of the car's old fashioned dashboard showed an analog needle which registered gasoline reserve. It read zero. His father's fault, of course, another example among many of lack of foresight, by a generation now completely out of date.

He got out of the car. There were no gas stations nearby. He hefted the Kit pack and set out. When he did pass near a gas station there were a lot of people there. He stood at a distance and watched them bicker with the owner over paying for gasoline and when a fight broke out he wisely turned away into the woods. Incredible, arguing over the exchange of useful fluids for useless, symbolic paper. He had no money to buy anything, because in the new order about to descend upon the world in the wake of the Kollapse, all value would be digitized.

The masters of that new millennium would be those who had the Net skills to manage the innovative regime.

Shouts. He studied the gas station through binoculars. A man was waving a gun.

How pointless. Power would not come from old methods. That man was mired in the past.

He struck out with the sure, steady gait of one who has the future in his pocket and knows it.

Soon dark came. He had always thought of the Kollapse coming with the morning, representing as it did a new day in human consciousness, so the fall of dusk was a little unsettling. Already the woods had petered out and he was heading into grasslands. Best to get as far as possible. He had a flashlight with him, a real gem, only thirty grams and surprisingly powerful. In the excitement he had forgotten to take it out of the Kollapse Kit 2.4 and when he did now it gave no light because, of course, it was solar powered.

For weeks he had been meaning to recharge the

batteries.

Well, he couldn't do everything. He put it away and forged on. Bushes brushed him in the gathering gloom and then he sprawled headlong into a ditch. He lay there calculating his best move. He was not injured but after a while he decided that perhaps he should stop anyway.

He lay there in the night and watched a satellite skim across the horizon. To be so visible it had to be in low orbit, probably specially launched for surveillance.

He fell asleep shivering. Kollapse Kit 2.4 had no room for bulky things like blankets, which could be acquired later anyway in exchange for far more valuable data. The thin silvered sheets he had instead helped some, but weren't really comforting.

At dawn he surveyed the terrain ahead. Rugged, just the thing to stop the mindless hordes from following him. He climbed a hill and looked back. Through his pocket binoculars he watched a distant highway, packed to a standstill with traffic, a perfect metaphor.

Time for breakfast. He got out his laptop and set it on its black plastic mat. All the gear in the Kit was black, the only hip color. A black cord led to a solar array.

He powered up and felt the gigabytes surge beneath his fingertips. He accessed his hard disk library and found EDIBLE PLANTS OF NORTH AMERICA. A quick word search found his area and on the screen popped up three-color displays of leaves, berries and roots. No need for geezer-style hardcopy from his printer, a marvel of compactness—the screen had way more pixels than he needed.

He spent the half hour allotted in his schedule searching for these as he hiked along, but the screen colors did not match very well with those in nature. It occurred to Wirehead that maybe he should have done some field research about this. Still, that would have taken valuable time, too, he reasoned. He could not risk eating anything potentially poisonous so he slogged on.

The few scattered houses he avoided. They had no satellite dishes in view and so were probably not tied into the Net and would be left behind in the New Info Order. Reorganizing the world would be by definition a global problem. How could this point have eluded them?

At lunch time, without any foraged berries or leaves, he kept his strength up with the one can of warm Jolt cola he had brought. This did not quiet his rumbling stomach so he used his remaining water reserve to dissolve some bouillon cubes. These were beef bouillon and quite salty. When he had planned his Kollapse Kit 2.4 the bouillon was to accompany the chopped berries and roots around a crackling fire.

*The masters of that new millennium would be those who had the Net skills to manage the innovative regime.*



Drinking salty cold water in scrub desert, though, just made him thirsty.

By this time he had gotten a sunburn even though he was wearing a cap. He wore the cap backwards of course, so that he did not look like a dork. It had a team emblem above the bill, but he never wasted his time watching such stuff and did not know what team the emblem represented, or even what sport. The sunburn itched a lot. He spent all his time indoors, on the Net, or else in the virtual reality setup he had built himself, complete with data gloves and spex. He thought about the cool recesses of cyberspace while his tongue rasped on his lips like a file on rock.

He reached Focus Point 3.5 in early afternoon. It was a cave in a folded sandstone ridge. He had picked it himself from a detailed topographical survey, available on ftp@geosurv.gov. The survey had not shown that below the cave was a steep drop—the resolution was only five meters—into thick brambles. Wirehead discovered this while inching along the ridgeline. He had chosen to approach Focus Point 3.5 from above so that he could see and assess whoever had already reached it. Planning was paying off. Peering over the edge, he slipped and tumbled down—rolling by the cave, then over the drop. He estimated that it was at least two meters, a clear fall.

Getting out of the brambles and putting bandages on several parts of himself took longer than he had allowed in his plans. It was already late afternoon when he flopped at the entrance of the dusky cave. He lay there panting and noticed that his shoes had worn down considerably, even though they were made of the latest high-impact plastics.

No time to search for firewood. He was tired anyway. He lay there and thought about ice cream until he heard footsteps.

It was HeavyLink, marching along under an antique Desert Storm field helmet. Wirehead recognized HeavyLink and the helmet from the picture posted on the Kollapse bulletin board. He had never met HeavyLink before, of course, because there was no need to travel in real space when your mind was free in cyberspace.

"Hi," he said.

"Uh, hi." HeavyLink was shorter than Wirehead had expected, somehow, with a big belly.

"Glad ta meecha, Heavy." Wirehead shook hands. HeavyLink's grip was soft.

"We're in the big time, Wired."

Wirehead's real name was Arnold, like Schwarzenegger, but on the Net he was Wirehead@user.web.com. and preferred to stay that way even face to face.

"Dig, that's your own Kit, right?" Heavy always used retro 60s slang.

"Kollapse Kit 2.4, my own design."

"Mine is, too." Heavy grunted as he let his Kit pack thump to the floor of the cave. "Apocalypse Angel '96."

To Wirehead it looked like an ordinary wilderness backpack with APOCA ANGEL stenciled across the back in flaming red. One of the sore spots on the Kollapse bulletin board was that some people just wouldn't agree on a standard terminology for Kits. Some used the clear, orderly number system, just like for software, while others like HeavyLink slapped on

the year when they'd conceived the plan of their Kits.

Covering his annoyance, Wirehead started breaking out some of his gear. It was all custom, hardwired for the Kollapse, high bandwidth. "I figure it was the currency tumble," Wirehead said.

"Huh?" HeavyLink was unpacking, too. "Howzzat?"

"International trading broke down, 'cause somebody finally hacked the Treasury Exchange."

"Total B.S."

Wirehead bit his inner lip but kept calm. HeavyLink was a neo-Netter compared with Wirehead and you had to tolerate some crap from them sometimes. "Most probable cause of all, Syntho said."

"No way." Syntho was a CompuServe megahacker who had broadcast on all the boards an elaborate scheme for breaking into the Exchange. "That was just PR he put out."

"He said he was spreading it so that the proper authorities could prevent any really bad guys from spiking in," Wirehead said.

HeavyLink made an imitation fart sound, pretty authentic. "That was pure cover. He just wanted credit for the idea, is all."

"Okay then, so what did cause the Kollapse?"

"Obvious. Somebody hacked the credit info, all the bank records, the works."

Wirehead frowned. "I heard of that somewhere."

"Sure, in How to Surf the Coming Catastrophe."

"I've got that on floppy."

"So do I."

"Maybe I'll read it right now."

HeavyLink kept unpacking his gear. "Who's got the time?"

"You mean you didn't read it either?"

HeavyLink shrugged. "Slid my eyes over the abstract in the Squeezed Books CD listing."

"I've got that, too." Wirehead didn't like being down on data, but at least he had it in the two dozen CDs he carried, right next to the built in CD reader on his laptop, cozy as anything.

A big black slab like a huge single wing came shooting over the horizon. To Wirehead it looked a lot like the paper airplanes he had sailed in grade school. "Stealth bomber!" he cried in surprise, his war gaming years coming back in a rush.

The shock wave knocked both of them over. The dark wedge fled over the horizon, leaving a thin white trail that quickly evaporated.

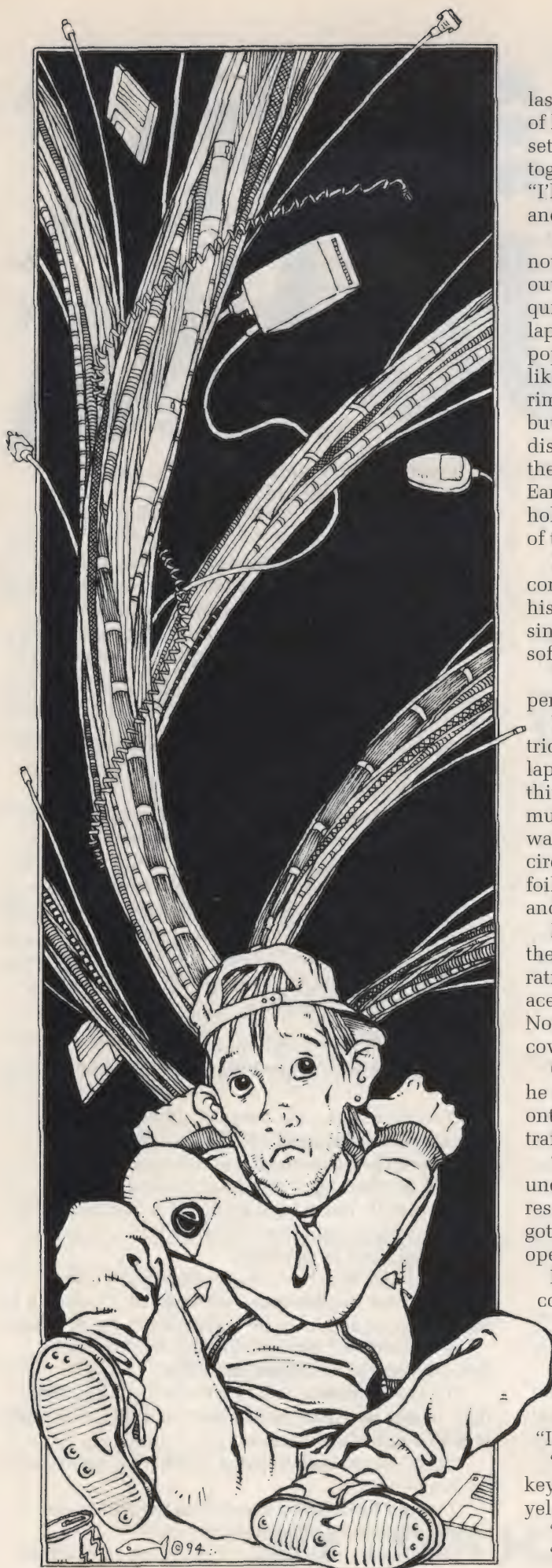
"War!" HeavyLink shouted. "Not some systems hacking—war."

"I would have heard about it on the Net. I was online when the Kollapse started and—"

"It's plain as Unix, man." HeavyLink slapped the

The shock wave knocked both of them over. The dark wedge fled over the horizon, leaving a thin white trail that quickly evaporated.





last  
of his  
setup  
together.

"I'll get online  
and show you."

Wirehead was  
not going to be  
outdone in the field  
quite so easily. He had his  
laptop out pronto, and  
popped the short cable to a disk  
like an upside-down Frisbee. Its  
rim flared out rather than turning in,  
but guys in the biz called them thrower  
disks anyway, because pointed at the sky  
they could throw messages clear around the  
Earth. The disk had an aluminum base with  
holes punched in the struts to reduce weight. Top  
of the line.

He powered up. The whine of the hard drive was a  
comforting song, in the strife of the moment. Up came  
his operating system. Effortlessly he punched in  
single-key commands that brought on whole slabs of  
software, customized for just this moment.

"Way past wicked fast, man," HeavyLink whis-  
pered with approval, and then bent to his own setup.

Wirehead loved the warm, blissful rivulets that  
trickled up his spine, pure cyberpleasure, as his  
laptop ran five different search programs on true,  
thirty-two bit, inter-threaded preemptive  
multitasking. Micro macho to the max! Rapt, he  
watched the entire computing power of western civ,  
circa 1972, labor in his lap. The flat panel adjusted to  
foil the slanting sunset glare with no problem, sharp  
and true, full color, high res.

His dish worked the exact microwave frequency of  
the geosynchronous satellite, with high signal to noise  
ratio. He got through the usual blocks and soon was  
aceing the protocols in highly select channels:  
NorAmComm, WorldNet, ZyncOn. His search pattern  
covered the whole range.

Only, nothing was coming in. "Blank, nada, zero,"  
he muttered as he slapped three of the search patterns  
onto the Windows display at once. Not a burble of  
traffic.

"No pace in the pixels," he muttered, feeling  
uneasy. He let the patterns run background and  
resorted to the highest level he had, a program he had  
gotten on the sly from a pirate bulletin board  
operation.

Nothing. Here he had the computing power that  
could have run the whole Apollo moon landing,  
dedicated to making Donald Duck, in a spitting  
rage, pop up in icon to tell him there was  
nothing, nothing at all, frying on any search.

"It's . . . it's all gone," he muttered.

HeavyLink looked over his own laptop screen.  
"I can't believe it."

"The whole Net. Down." Wirehead caressed his  
keyboard, filling the soft green background with  
yellow type. Meaningless, but reassuring.

"You don't suppose . . . ?"

"That the Net itself . . . kollapsed?"



"Naw. Can't be."  
"Maybe it was the I Squared Conspiracy."  
HeavyLink frowned. "What's that?"  
"Iran-Iraq. I read about it on the Armageddon Age  
bullboard."

"Huh. Ask me, it was the Japanese."  
"Or else an eco-kollapse."  
"Or OPEC making a power grab again."  
"Or Earth First! monkeywrenching."  
"But . . . " HeavyLink's eyes were plaintive.  
"How'll we ever know?"

"Let me think about that a moment." Wirehead  
always said that to gain time.

HeavyLink tapped away at his laptop—a standard  
item, off the shelf. His setup was a kludge. Wirehead  
looked away in quiet disdain. HeavyLink lacked some  
bandwidth, for sure. After a while HeavyLink's fingers  
stilled. Silence fell in the gathering cold of early  
evening. A dry wind blew through the cave mouth,  
moaning softly. Wirehead had waited for this  
dramatic moment, when all hope was lost in his  
online buddy. He began to speak.

"Do you know what most people are, Heavy?"  
"Uh, mundanes?"

This was the usual online term for outsiders, but  
Wirehead waved away the word. "Amoebas is a better  
term."

"Huh?"

"All an amoeba knows of its watery world is what  
it physically bumps into. It has no buffers. If it meets  
a poison, it learns of it just as it dies.  
People—ordinary people—are like that."

"And us . . . ?"

HeavyLink was not slow, just younger on the Net.  
Wirehead smiled enigmatically. "Evolution gave more  
complex organisms better buffers. In animals, vision  
and scent. In ordinary people, ideas. To us, the Net."

"Oh, I see. But look, with the Net down—"

"That is temporary. I am talking about the far  
horizon of this Kollapse, HeavyLink. I am looking  
beyond the moment."

"Yeah, but—"

"Shall I tell you what I see?"

HeavyLink blinked and nodded. Wirehead had  
found that people on the Net reacted well to visionary  
talk. That was in text format, of course. He was  
thrilled to find that the same rhetoric worked in  
person. Maybe dealing with people in the flesh was  
not as hard as he had thought. He would have to  
rethink that, sometime, maybe examine the disaster of  
his high school years.

"I see the obsolete, falling by the wayside in this  
Kollapse. I see even the young, their thin cries  
echoing, calling for help. For a savior, a true leader,  
someone to point the way. For vision, for inspiration,  
for data, for a plan."

"And that's . . ."

"Us. We are the future."

"Not without the Net we aren't."

"But the Net is merely down for a moment.  
HeavyLink, we've planned for this for years. When  
Chaos stalks the streets and valleys of the world, only  
the Net can bring Order. And we, as Net veterans, will

be  
the  
only  
leaders  
who can  
show the way."

"We all  
thought the Net  
would make it  
through."

"It will. And we will rule,  
those who know how to use it.  
Think, man! There won't be  
newspapers, TV will be babbling  
sensationalism, the politicians won't  
know zip! Only we'll be able to cope."

"I don't think so." HeavyLink had  
finished packing up. He stood.

"What you think now doesn't matter."  
Wirehead kept his voice calm, reasonable. "We'll  
get things sorted out and soon enough—"

"You've got to live that long first," HeavyLink said.

He took from his Kit pack a pistol. "Mister Smith  
and Mister Wesson," he said fondly. "Top grade.  
Chromed, too."

Wirehead blinked, shocked. "What? Physical  
violence? That's hopelessly twencen!"

"That's what we're still in, y'know—the TwenGen.  
Now if you'll just hand over your food . . ."

"All I've got is a few packages of, well, candy bars."

"Let's have 'em, then." HeavyLink crooked a finger.

"But you can't mean this. We're buddies—in the  
Net—together!"

HeavyLink said softly, almost gently. "It ever occur  
to you that you never even seen me before today?"

Wirehead opened his mouth but he could think of  
nothing to say. HeavyLink stuffed the candy bars into  
his pack, grunted as he slung it over his shoulder, and  
started off into the wilderness.

"Stop! You and I, together—we can inherit the  
whole world!"

HeavyLink looked back and grinned. "You can  
have my half."

Wirehead shouted his worst curse at the dwindling  
figure. "You're—you're a flamer!"

They found Wirehead a week later.

The National Guard patrol had already gotten tired  
of dealing with the Net users who littered the  
landscape. Hordes of them had rushed out of the  
cities, in a curious imitation of lemming behavior.  
They had taken a rumor runaway on the Net, with a  
dash of mob psychology, as the signal for the demise  
of all order. Conspiracy enthusiasts were holed up in  
small canyons, armed to the teeth.

The Net Krash had driven masses of users onto the  
highways and into the confused countryside. The  
troops referred to them as "wireweenies" and were  
weary and resigned when they came upon the body.

Wirehead had died of thirst, apparently, lips and  
tongue leathery and purple. His arms were wrapped  
around his laptop and satellite dish, as if to draw  
energy from them. ■

I see the obsolete, falling by the wayside in this Kollapse. I see even the young, their thin cries echoing, calling for help.



**BY  
BARRINGTON  
J. BAYLEY**

'ere when I came!"

"Oh yeah. Yess'day, I mean. Or day before."

Harry had it all planned. Thirty fuckin' years? Wanna fuckin' try it, mate? He'd keep his head down, behave himself, get out of here to longstay nick, then grovel for a couple of years till he'd worked his way to one of them soft nicks with only a fence to keep you in. Then he'd be off. Five years at the outside. Why, it was like he was already on the home stretch, or as good as. That made him feel all right.

Or it would if "Treacle" wasn't relating the drama of his trial for the hundredth time, how his counsel had fucked up, what he had said to the judge, what the judge had replied, what he had said back again. "It's not evidence, yer see, it's not evidence just 'cos somebody sees yer do it. That ain't evidence, is it? On'y that fackin' cant judge told the jury it was! Yer Honour, I says, excuse me Yer Honour but yer don't know the fackin' law. Oh, you think not, he says, all hoity-toity. No, I says, 'cos yer a fackin' cant! Then he turns to the jury and says, you may think in your hearts this man is guilty. Can yer fackin' beat that? Wivout 'im I wouldn't'a got more 'n four years, I

year stretch. Yesterday he'd  
tion wing. "This is to familiarize  
he screw had said grandly.  
to do that for, you think I've  
ck before, you fuckin' cant?  
ne familiar pleasure of  
n a long line of men  
o a big tank of piss,  
The stench had been  
ightmares. The screws  
bably they'd got used to  
t for a dip in the  
up the turds.  
e way they  
ngly to one  
the lines of

but yer don't know the fuckin' law. Oh, you think not, he  
says, all hoity-toity. No, I says, 'cos yer a  
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Not that Harry the Bastard had any intention of making trouble. "Don't worry abaht it," the nutter in the top bunk—"Treacle



reckon."

His patience close to breaking, Harry the Bastard screeched at his cellmate, "I'll fackin' beat you if ya don't fackin' shut up!"

Treacle subsided for the moment. Jesus Christ! He'd be off again in a minute.

A bell rang, on and on for about five minutes, an endless irritating noise. It meant it was time for the mid-day meal. All around him he heard the pace of the prison quicken. The automatic cell doors were clanging open. Cons were shuffling onto the landings.

"Grub's up!" Treacle sprang down from his bunk. He shook the bars of the sliding door. "Open the fackin' door!"

As if at his bidding, the door slid aside. Harry followed him onto the landing.

Extending up and down, for what seemed an endless depth, was a canyon of galleries. Columns of men shuffled dispiritedly along the landings, their faces grey, their eyes tired. A hint of suspicion entered Harry's mind. If this was a holding nick, why was it holding so many? Jeez, he wouldn't be able to spend much time in a place like this. He'd go crazy.

The endless lines of men released an odour of stale sweat which competed with the ever-present smell of shit. Nobody seemed to think of cleaning the landings. There was rubbish on the floors, stains and smears on the walls, all adding to the foetid air. Harry shuffled forward. It took him an hour to reach the dining hall. Then he was handed a spoon and a battered tin dish filled with foul-smelling slop, some sort of vegetable gruel. Twenty minutes was the allotted time to eat it, at long trestle tables where cons sat on wooden benches, elbow to elbow. He didn't want to touch such muck, not with a barge pole, but once again he found himself ravenously hungry. Somehow he contrived to switch off his senses of taste and smell and forced the stuff down, accompanied by gulps of water from a tin mug placed on the table.

The journey back to the cell took less time. There were screws stationed at some of the intersections. Harry plucked up the courage to approach one.

"Sir," he said humbly, "there ain't no mirror in me cell. Can I have a mirror so I can shave meself prop'ly?"

The cell was fitted with an electric shaver but totally lacked reflecting surfaces. The screw gave a funny little smile as he pulled out a pencil and a writing pad. He wrote down the number of Harry's tunic.

"Seven-four-one-five Simpson. Shaving mirror. You'll get one tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir."

Harry shuffled on with head bent and joined Treacle in the cell. The door clanged shut.

A weariness overcame Harry. He lay down on his bunk and whimpered with tiredness. Above him, Treacle's bunk creaked as the aged con moved restlessly on it.

"Ere, you reckon we could get some draw? Somebody's bound to sneak some in visitin'. Maybe we could get some teatime. 'Ere, did I tell you about my trial? There was this fackin' judge, see—"

"Shurru-u-p!" Harry groaned.

In spite of the interminable monologue, he eventually managed to doze off. It must have been late afternoon when the cell door clanged open again. A young prison officer stood there, the light from the landing at his back.

"Seven-four-one-five Simpson. Come with me."

Obediently, Harry rose and followed. Was he being moved already? They went to the end of the landing and down the spiral stairway from gallery to gallery, down and down until they must have been somewhere near ground level. Harry began to feel relieved. He reckoned he was out of here and to longstay.

The screw opened a door and ordered him through it. He was in a cramped office. A higher-ranking screw with two stripes on his shoulder sat at a desk. The younger screw stood at attention beside Harry. Harry drew himself up, tried to stand at attention as well.

The screw was reading some papers on his desk. He looked up. "Harold Arthur Simpson, you have served your term of imprisonment as prescribed by a court of law. Today is your appointed release date."

Harry blinked. He clenched his jaw to keep his face blank and hide his cunning thoughts. *Fackin' Jesus Christ, they've facked up. Fackin' stupid cants, they're lettin' me out on my second day! Got the wrong date down, got the names mixed up or some'in. Prob'ly usin' trusties in admin, fack things up on purpose. Strewth, what fackin' luck! Don't let it show! Don't look surprised! For Gawd's sake look like you was expectin' it!*

"You know the procedure, Simp-son," the seated screw was saying. "You'll have a medical check before release. Then you pick up your belongings and a release grant of fifty pounds in cash. And we don't want to see you here again."

It was really hard not to burst out laughing when Harry heard the screw say that. "No, sir," he muttered.

*Please Gawd, don't let them find out*

*in time. Please let me get through them gates.*

*Please! His palms*

*were sweating as the junior screw took him to medical. There*

*were two quacks in white coats. They did all the usual stuff, took*

*his pulse, his blood pressure, listened to his heart through a stethoscope. They told him to sit in a fancy-looking chair like at the dentist. About then, a file of five or six screws came in through a different door and sat down in a row. They were all young, in spanking brand new uniforms. Harry could see the score. They were new recruits learning the prison drill.*

"This won't hurt." One of the docs gave him an injection in his arm. The other lowered a headset over his skull, something like a hairdresser would use. "We're just testing your reflexes."

They seemed to spend a long time setting it up, fiddling with knobs and watching a computer screen. He felt a number of hard objects, like big needles, probing his skull. Finally one quack nodded to the other, who pressed a button.

"That's fine."

The headset was lifted away. Harry the Bastard stood up. Momentarily, everything around him seemed more vivid than before, as though a fog had cleared away. It was the excitement, he realized.

He was fighting to stop himself shaking. He remembered other nicks he'd been in, and how long the release procedure

**"This won't hurt."  
One of the docs gave him  
an injection in his arm.  
The other lowered a headset over his skull,  
something like a hairdresser would use.  
"We're just testing your reflexes."**





could take. Gawd, at any second they might find out!

The escort screw took him to where he shed his prison uniform and retrieved his own belongings. The clothes were somebody else's and he had to bite his tongue to stop himself from saying, "Eh, these ain't my togs; where's mine?" Instead, he pulled them on hurriedly and found they fitted more or less. Then papers were being signed and he was off to the paymaster, who counted out five tenners. "You'll need this, too. Carry it at all times." An identity card. He stuffed the money and card in his pocket and then he found himself in the yard before the big prison gate. And magic, magic, magic, the guard screw was opening a little door in the gate for Harry to go through.

And so there was Harry the Bastard, two days into his sentence and already free, his back to the prison gate. Down the road was a bus stop and he saw a bus coming round the corner. Get out of here, get out of here! He ran for the bus, got off a couple of streets later, dodged round a corner and got another bus, got off it and darted into the Underground. Run! Run! Before they find out their mistake! Get to the other side of town and lose yourself! Run!

Once the releasees had left, Dr. Everton spoke to the new staff intake. "You can see how simple the procedure is. Unlike the operation which we carry out during admission, there is no need for a general anaesthetic or to introject physically into the brain. An EMF pulse is aimed at the previously implanted blocker, switching it off. The full function of the hippocampus is thereby restored."

He nodded to Dr. Glear, his assistant. "You won't be seeing much of me, as I'm retiring soon. You'll become familiar with Dr. Glear, who is my replacement. I've been doing this job for thirty years. Since the day memory blocking was introduced into the prison service, in fact."

He ruminated. These young men would have difficulty comprehending the situation that had existed thirty years ago. A sharply rising penal population as the crime rate got out of hand. Grossly overcrowded prisons, mostly built in Victorian times, conditions so bad, staff numbers so inadequate, that order broke down and prison after prison was wrecked in uncontrollable riots.

The solution had been presented as a temporary measure at first, but it had proved so successful that it was now the prison service's primary means of control. It was known that the hippocampus was the organ of the brain responsible for transferring short-term memory



into long-term memory. If it was destroyed, as had sometimes happened through disease or accident, the victim was left with short-term memory only. It was as if his life came to a halt at that point. Everything that happened subsequently he forgot after about ten minutes.

In the reception wing, the inmate was given a day to learn the prison routine. Then the block was put on the hippocampus. In place of it there was a buffer which allowed about ten hours of memory, but only sketchily.

Cons were almost always tractable in the first few days of admission, no matter how vile the conditions. They'd hardly be much good at organizing trouble with their memories gone, anyway. The longest-serving prisoners had already been here for thirty years, and some would remain for the rest of their lives, perpetually convinced that they were only in the second day of their sentences.

"The technique is mainly useful on long-term prisoners. It enables us to hold an enormous number of such inmates at very low cost, using only a skeleton staff. Of course, certain rules are necessary. The convicts must be cut off altogether from the outside world. There are no visits and no letters. No mirrors are allowed inside the prison. And the regime is totally secret from the public, otherwise the cons would come in knowing what is being done to them. Such secrecy is only possible under a strong government. Fortunately, since the parliamentary reforms, we have one."

Dr. Everton shrugged. "For my money, euthanasia would be an even cheaper response to crime, but there you are."

He stopped and waited for questions. In most intakes, there was a smart-arse who asked questions.

"Is the technique reliable?"

"Perfectly. We memory-test every few years. If the block seems to be weakening, we can boost it."

"Don't the convicts ever say anything about being released so soon?"

"We are dealing with murderers, rapists, thieves, and the like. They universally assume they are the beneficiaries of an administrative error, and can't believe their luck. If they do say anything, we just ignore it and chivvy them along."

"Isn't it risky to restore their memory at all?" the rookie officer persisted. "They might put two and two together. They could go to the news media."

"It hasn't happened so far. They're not too bright, remember. What's more, they have a pretty low survival rate. The world they return to is considerably rougher than the one they left, added to which they are very much disorientated. What follow-ups there have been indicate that few are left alive after the first two weeks."

The smile on Dr. Everton's lips became chillier. "Without a properly functioning hippocampus, no one could cope with the outside world at all; so ethically, a discharged convict's memory has to be restored. A greater danger to security would be leaks from inside; but I believe you've all signed the Official Secrets Act."

Harry came up out of the Underground. He had chosen Finchley, a district that he wasn't too familiar with, in case the police would be looking for him in his usual haunts. That is, if prison admin ever found out its mistake. What if they never did? Gor blimey, that'd be good.

Christ, he needed a drink. He saw a pub and headed across the road.

"Pint of bitter." Harry guzzled it, and was surprised at the effect the beer had on him. His head was swimming. It was the excitement, he supposed again.

There weren't many people in the pub. It was tawdry, with a musty smell, and the jukebox was playing music of a kind he hadn't heard before, horrid-sounding jerky stuff. The place was a rip-off, too. Four quid for a fackin' pint! He only had forty quid left, now. The rest had gone on fares. But he could hardly have cared. He was flying. He'd have to head up north, he thought craftily. No, he would stand out, there. He would have to—

His plans became confused.

A bunch of lads came in. Their gear was weird, somehow reminding him of the jukebox music.

They were dressed like clowns, but with tufts and spikes of colored cloth sticking out all over them. One was an up front lout, a sick grin stuck permanently to his face. They went

to the bar, but Harry saw that sick-grin was looking him up and down. Suddenly the lad spoke in a loud, insolent, accusing voice.

"I know them clo'es! Them's prison release clo'es! You just come aht, incha?"

"Nah," Harry said mildly, shaking his head. "Nah."

"Oh yeah you fackin' 'ave!" Sick-grin's face became contorted. He stepped closer, staring straight into Harry's face. "You just come aht. Wiv fifty quid!" He thrust out his hand. "Gie it!"

"Nah," Harry said. "Nah, I ain't."

He moved to go, but found his path blocked. A fist hit him in the face. "Gie us ya fackin' release money, ya fackin' old cant!"

He went down. Heavy boots were kicking him. He felt a rib crack. A steel-shod toe hit his cheekbone, causing stars to explode. His jacket was ripped open, his pockets emptied. The lads swaggered from the pub cheering and jeering, waving his tenners.

Harry lay on the floor, groaning. The burly, beer-bellied barman leaned over the counter, staring down at him impassively. "Pick yerself up and get aht."

"Awright." He clawed himself to his feet. His chest hurt. Blood was trickling down his face. "Lemme use the bog. Clean meself up."

"Be quick abaht it."

Harry staggered into the gents and found the wash-basin. He hung onto it while he sucked in air, careful of his broken rib. He looked at himself in the mirror. A big bruise was developing on his left cheek. Blood was pouring from his nose. But that wasn't all. Harry the Bastard, who had been in his mid-thirties when convicted, saw before him an aging, half-starved face. Dirt had worked itself into copious wrinkles. The skin was grey with thirty years of prison pallor. Harry looked, and a frown of puzzlement came over the unfamiliar injured face in the mirror, and he looked, and puzzled, and looked. ■

**"The technique is mainly useful on long-term prisoners. It enables us to hold an enormous number of such inmates at very low cost, using only a skeleton staff."**





# SATORI MUST BE

# SOMETHING JUST THE SAME

BY ANDY OLDFIELD

Benno could still taste the bitter residues of anxiety in his mouth. The unprovoked attack by a pair of King Cobras had shaken him and he still wasn't sure whether he was feeling dizzy because of the shock or the virtual neurotoxins.

He took a deep breath. The air was dry and hot but pleasant. It was gratifying to stop for a rest; a shame there was no bar or even a spring or pool, but you can't have everything. At least the scenery was good—the clusters of trees around the ruined temple were pretty, and the temple itself had a ramshackle charm even if the blue-painted corrugated-iron roof had fallen off and decapitated the smiling Buddha figure inside. The head lay in the sandy dust beaming as though it

had suffered no adversity. Benno could feel his pulse slowing to normal. He considered the Buddha. It did look remarkably like Fat Sid. Or maybe it was the other way round.

He turned his attention to the trees. He thought he'd had it rough, but his heart went out to the animal up the nearest tree, silhouetted against the bright tropical sun. It was just pitiful. Scarcely enough strength left in its broken claws to hang on with. It wasn't quite bald, a few tufts of hair were left, but most of its skin was covered with tumors and crusty green-brown scabs which leaked blood and pus where the wretched thing had been scratching itself. Its large, sad eyes were



inflamed and rheumy. It snuffled and dribbled at the corner of its mouth.

"A gremlin," he muttered.

Fat Sid tutted. "No. It's an arboreal marsupial. . . Koala."

"With a pretty hideous STD virus." Benno glanced at the purulent red genitals.

"Randy little marsupials, Koalas. Cute when they're clean though."

Benno shrugged. It was difficult to envisage it as anything other than a lump of offal barely clinging to a branch in a tree. Cute? It didn't even look as though it was properly alive anymore—more like it was an advanced state of decomposition. He squinted at the messy lump, as if that would help it resolve into a cute little furball. He pulled out his medic-pouch and started reading labels to see if he had anything which might help.

"Don't waste your time, the stuff in there's mostly placebo anyhow. Eyes front," said Fat Sid, clicking his fingers. A set of menu icons materialized. Fat Sid pointed at a clock which dropped down a sub menu for controlling temporal speed and direction. He altered the parameters and the menus disappeared.

Benno stared at the Koala. It was like watching a time-lapse video in reverse. Mangy claws grew whole, long and strong. Ulcerous flesh gave way to clean healthy skin covered with thick greyish fur. Eyes sparkled wholesomely. Then a visual jolt into real time and there was the pretty little thing exuding sweetness as it slowly reached out for a clump of leaves, put them into its mouth and slowly and deliberately chewed.

"Awgh," said Benno. "It's cute as hell. I love it."

The Koala stopped in mid-chew and spat out the greenery.

"It's off its food," concern tinged Benno's voice.

Fat Sid looked at the tree. "Sacrilegious critter," he muttered. "It's supposed to live only on eucalyptus trees."

"So?"

"The little bugger's up a bo tree."

"And that's an acquired taste?"

"Acquired taste, nothing," fumed Fat Sid. "It's a holy tree. It's the tree the Lord Buddha got enlightenment sitting under."

"Oh right. You're into that. Sorry, I forgot. Still it's good of you to heal him."

"Isn't really cleaned up, I just wound it back a bit into a different time slot. Virus is still in its cells, replicating away." Fat Sid sat in the sparse shade of the bo tree and sulked. Sunlight glinted off the moist baldness of his head. He closed his eyes, annoyance drifting into beatific detachment, the rolls of fat on his jowls casting sharp shadows down his cheeks and neck. Little beads of sweat stood out on his naked chest and headed for his ample cleavage. Above him the Koala sniffed suspiciously at another bunch of leaves it had picked.

Benno shook his head. "OK it may be a holy tree, but it's not as if it's a really real bo tree."

Fat Sid opened one eye. "And I'm not a really real

Buddha either, huh?"

"I dunno. Who's to say?"

"Exactly."

"But I promise I'll read up on it when I get home."

"Is that a gentle hint?" Fat Sid opened the other eye. "It's a good one. I pledged I'd get you back. So let's hit out."

Benno held out a hand for the saffron loin-clothed figure and helped him to his feet. Fat Sid shielded his eyes against the sunlight, sniffed the air like a mongrel in search of a butcher's shop or a really interesting lamppost, and nodded past the bo tree towards a line of blue-grey hills which shimmered in the middle-distance haze.

"Why does it have to be so far? It's only a virtual landscape," Benno grumbled.

"It's like the man said, the road is long and difficult. Only the righteous have the staying power, so it's lucky you found me."

"Yeah?"

"No one else could get you back to the gate and your own world."

"Digital transfer sounds better than walking."

"But you'd miss the scenery if we just read ourselves across—soul food for the spirit scenery. And there's less chance of our data files getting corrupted if we walk."

They tramped across the open land, crushing thick leaved grasses into sandy soil. The flatlands were contained ahead by the line of hills while rainforest pressed in on either side. It was appropriate, Fat Sid said, that they should be traversing the middle way.

As they headed for the hills they caught occasional glimpses of temples and buildings in the forest margins. The air was full of the sound of their own footsteps and faint jungle noises. From off in the luxuriant greenery Benno thought he could make out the faint wavering sing-song call of an Imam, and before too long he spotted the minaret from where the faithful were being summoned to prayer. It gleamed a pure ghostly white, winking in and out of sight, in and out of existence, drawing Benno's eyes towards it. He stopped to stare and listen.

"Hey, you getting the spirit bug?" Fat Sid elbowed him. "My way'd suit you better. Help you shed the bucket-loads of bad Karma you're toting."

Benno shook his head. "I'm still a card-carrying agnostic. Perhaps it's the heat, but that wailing and all is mesmerizing stuff. I'd never have even begun to get a handle on its appeal if I hadn't cocked-up the sector-choice menu back in the virtual reality shop, so I don't suppose it's been a total waste of time. Maybe all this was meant to be?"

"No chance, it'd add up to a totally counter-productive bad Karma overload. Neither God, fate, providence nor any temporary wobble in the wheel of Dharma would stoop to get you so wasted on booze, narcotics, hallucinogens and who-knows what else, that when you stumbled into a VR shop you were incapable of coordinating your mind long enough to point out where you wanted to go and ended up stranded in a religious quest sub-sector of the VirtualNet. Sounds more



like the devil's work if your belief system encompasses that sort of thing."

"Could be, I was trying to access some pretty filthy pleasures of the virtual flesh. It's the only way of scoring a worthwhile dose of sin without risking a viral dose as well."

Like a beacon, the minaret burned. The Imam's song a siren's song. "I gotta see it closer," said Benno. "Can we do a quick detour?"

"Once you have embarked on the Supramundane path, you shouldn't lightly leave it."

"Yeah, but like you said—it'll be good for my soul," Benno said as he started walking towards the jungle edge. "So I think it'll be all right."

Lizards scurried for cover at their approach. Clouds of metallic crimson dragonflies and turquoise butterflies lifted off their green and waxy launch pads and hovered in the canopy. Fat Sid led the way kicking barefoot through matted tangles of creepers, leaf litter and saplings. Benno brought up the rear, his stout but battered hiking boots scuffling in Fat Sid's wake.

Fat Sid saw the snakes first and froze. Each cobra was six yards long. The menace of their hissing seemed to plunge the rest of the jungle into total silence. In striking poses, with hoods outstretched, the pair were magnificent. Dappled sunlight glinted off their dark, glossy scales and their bright yellow undermarkings. Their eyes were trained on Benno.

"Shit," he said. "They're the same ones who attacked us last time."

"Attacked you," Fat Sid whispered. "Cobras like Buddhas. See the eye-like marks on their hoods? That's where the Lord Buddha blessed the Cobra who sheltered him with his hood while he meditated."

"He should have broke its neck, not blessed it."

Simultaneously, the snakes struck. Sprays of venom hit Benno in both eyes and as he screamed and fell to the forest floor, it was as though his skin was being lacerated by a million red-hot, barbed hypodermic needles. Sinking in a maelstrom of pain he anticipated consciousness slipping away and leaving him in blessed relief, but consciousness didn't relinquish its hold and the pain only mollified slightly as the ferocity and suddenness of the attack abated.

"There's something odd about this," Fat Sid said. Benno squinted through eyes that were already beginning to swell and puff-up. Fat Sid held two long, dead snakes in his hands. "I have an intuition that killing these things doesn't count as contravening the path of right conduct. I know this stuff. I have the six superknowledges and these are not living creatures, they were destined for no rebirth and they carried no shadows of former lives either."

"Screw their former lives. I'm dying," Benno shouted as he rifled through his medic-pack. "Have I got any serious opiates or anti-venom in this thing?"

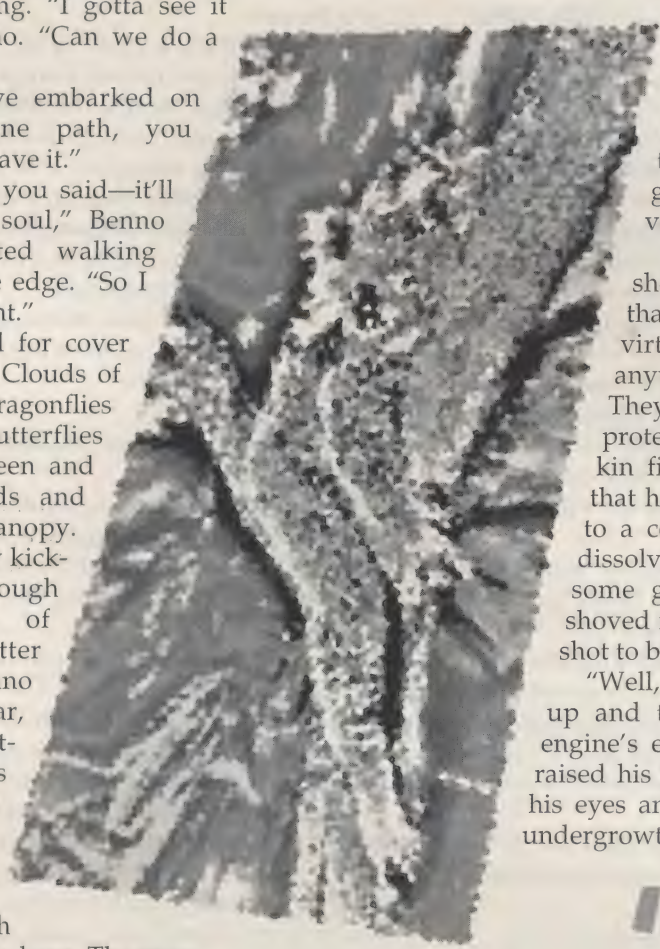
Fat Sid threw the snakes over his shoulder. "Relax. I already told you that stuff's no good. You can't die in virtual reality. Well not in this one, anyway. The software won't allow it. They built in all sorts of algorithms to protect people—they didn't want next of kin filing lawsuits and suing them. All that happens is when the discomfort gets to a certain level the virtual reality will dissolve and you'll be back in your body in some grubby cubicle with a few wires shoved in your head and your credit rating shot to bits."

"Well, I wish that threshold would hurry up and trigger. I feel like an anti-matter engine's exploding inside my body." Benno raised his head towards the fiery sun, closed his eyes and keeled over backwards into the undergrowth.

And then the pain resumed. It took Benno a few moments to realize that he'd been unconscious and had just woken up again. He was still sprawled out in the jungle. Fat Sid was looking anxiously at him. "I was worried," the tubby Buddha said. "You've been out a while. And you were ranting deliriously. I've not seen anything quite as intense with anyone else who's come in on a tourist ticket. Getting jumped by the same snakes twice is weird enough, but the venom's working as though it were real and it's making a real mess of you. You should've dissolved out into your own reality ages ago. Totally weird, I mean I could understand it if you were a part of the core program, but you're just an external variable."

Benno puked, vigorously.

"Bad sign," Fat Sid said. "And gangrene's already set in on your extremities." He examined Benno's puffy skin, pulling shredded tatters of clothing to one side and back again. "And you're turning septic over about four-fifths of your body. I think we'd better get to the gate as quick as we can and squirt you back into your real body." He pulled Benno up into a sitting position and hoisted him up across his





shoulders.

Benno moaned and had a flashback of a previous life, a previous life ending as his plague-ridden body was tossed, barely alive, into a communal burial pit.

The man carrying him was wreathed in sweet-smelling herbs. Benno hung over his shoulder and looked at the ground as his head jerked with each step the man made. He knew something awful was about to happen, but he didn't have the strength to do anything about it. Didn't know what to do if it came to that.

Troubled sensations from the present overlaid those of the flashback with the perfect sort of synchronization that wins awards for video directors. The scent of sweet-herbed talismans melted into sweat. The path to the burial pit evaporated and became a jungle track. The terrain shimmered and began to swirl, there was at least two of everything. Benno closed one eye to compensate. It wasn't enough. He closed the other and watched circular lightning arc into the center of darkness that lay inside his head. The lightning was bright; it hurt but he couldn't shut his eyes any tighter. It intensified, growing brighter and brighter, white then yellowy-pink and ultimately stark red. As it burnt red hot and made him feel ever dizzier and sicker he realized that it wasn't lightning after all, only the blood vessels at the back of his eyeballs.

It wasn't a particularly comforting discovery. He tried to open his eyes again, but they wouldn't budge. If he'd still been conscious as the lights went out, the black stillness would have come as a relief.

When the lights came back on the pain was still as bad, largely. There was less of him than there had been before he passed out, so there was less to hurt - in theory. Both legs were missing below the knee and he was slumped on a wooden floor in a wooden shack with his bloodied stumps and bare bone in sharp relief against the clean, warm polished brown of the floorboards. Stifling a scream, Benno put his hands in front of his eyes to try and blot out the horror. There was a squelch, and a sudden sense of lightness as his left hand and most of his left arm fell to the floor.

"I've some good news," Fat Sid said as hundreds of roaches and tiny lizards darted out and devoured Benno's severed arm. They were efficient and quick, leaving neither a crumb of flesh nor drop of blood behind. "I've read our personality files across to the

gate. You were too heavy to carry for far, even with bits of you dropping off."

Fat Sid conjured up menus from out of the air, clicking on and off icons, running diagnostic software. "Bad news is it's all been a waste of time. I can't patch you out of here and back into your real body, I'm afraid it's sort of dead."

"Dead?" Mental numbness worked an anaesthetic miracle on the pain racking Benno. "I'm dead?"

"Totally barbecued. The tacky VR shop you were using caught fire. The cheapskates hadn't paid the upkeep on the extinguishing systems. The owner did a runner, left you hardwired in and frying."

"So what am I going to do?"

"More bad news, I'm afraid. Once the connection with your body was broken the system identified you as an unauthorized presence. It's treating you as a virus. That's what the snakes were—virtual antibodies keeping the system clean, erasing viruses and possible logic bombs."

An ear fell off the side of Benno's head. The clean-up brigade removed all trace of it. "They're pretty efficient system defences," frowned Fat Sid. "I doubt that you'll last much longer."

"I'm going to die again? Twice in one day?"

"There is a way out."

Benno's eyes opened dangerously wide. He felt the skin give way. His vision instantly cut out and in the darkness he heard the distinctly organic sound of eyeballs impacting with wood followed by the scuttling of claws and many legs and the crunching of jaws and mandibles.

"Virtual reincarnation," Fat Sid's voice was a calming focal point in the darkness. "I can read your personality and memory and merge them into a part of the core program which isn't using up all the memory allocated to it. You'll be safe, part of the system."

"Which means?"

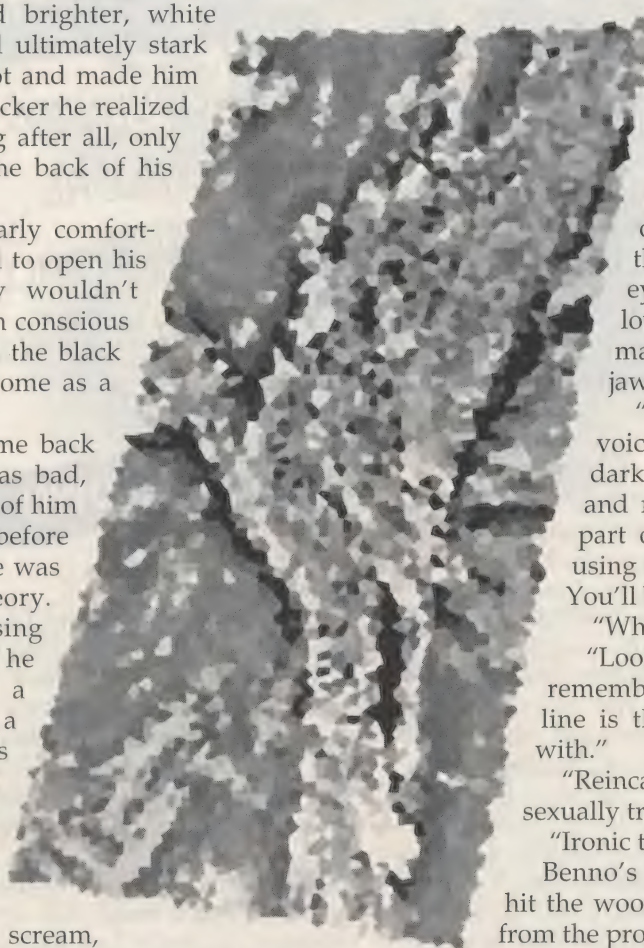
"Look, we don't have much time. You remember the Koala? Well the bottom line is that's the best I can fix you up with."

"Reincarnated as a Koala bear suffering sexually transmitted diseases?"

"Ironical turn of the wheel of life, eh?"

Benno's remaining arm rotted through, hit the woodwork and was promptly wiped from the program. "OK, do it," he said.

Clinging to a tree, Benno looked down at the ruined temple and the smiling head of the statue decapitated by the blue-painted corrugated iron roof. It was good to see again, even if he felt awful. His balls itched like mad, but he didn't feel confident







enough to leave go of the trunk and scratch them.

At the foot of his tree stood Fat Sid. The virtual Buddha held a mirror in his hands, angled so that Benno could see himself. He looked in the mirror, shuddered and wished he looked as cute as he had done when the clock had been wound back. Gazing at his reflection, he felt the same pangs of pity as he had when he first saw the ragged creature.

Today is the first day of the rest of my life, he brooded. What a bummer. He shrugged and looked down again at the fat little Buddha. He opened his mouth to complain, but found that virtual Koalas can't speak. He considered whole-body miming, but wasn't sure that he'd have the motor skills to hang on to the tree and convey the idea that it wasn't everyday you came into virtual reality for a sexual encounter and ended up being reincarnated as a diseased Koala bear instead. Resignedly, he reached out for a bunch of leaves and chewed them. They were appallingly bitter, he knew why the Koala had spat them out earlier. He spat and watched the half-chewed soggy green wad arc downwards and score a direct hit on Fat Sid's shaved head.

Fat Sid waved and shouted, before planting his feet firmly in the ground and shaking the tree. "And you can get out of that bloody bo tree. I've already

told you once—it's holy."

The tree shook. Benno tried to sink his claws deeper into the bark, but he didn't have the strength. He lost his grip and tumbled earthward. As he fell it occurred to him that a Buddha, even a virtual one, really ought to show a bit more respect. Especially to a composite personality Koala who had at least three demonstrably rough days on the same day.

Benno tried to quantify the roughness of his day; the Koala had a rough day by virtue of its wretched existence, his body had had a terminally rough day, his virtual self had pioneered new dimensions in rough days. There must be a universal law somewhere about the exponential nature of having a rough time, he thought, the whole seemed to add up to much more than the sum of the parts.

He hit the sand, it was a rough landing. Shaking the dusty sand out of what was left of his fur, he limped off in search of a virtual eucalyptus tree and a spot of quiet suffering. ■



**H**ello Kitty is copping feels off Wonder Woman. The Silly-String kids are panhandling the line outside the club, doing mock soft shoe routines (their useless arms flopping like cold noodles against their bodies; why do the arm nerves always burn out first?, you wonder), humiliating themselves for money, smokes and dope. You give a pogoing girl one of your cigarettes, and you have to light it for her. She's so far gone into Silly-String nerveburn that she can barely hold her head up. Still, she gives you a "Ciao, baby" wink and she hoofs her way down the line looking for other hand-outs. There's a glassy crunch across the street, and you turn in time to see Hello Kitty rolling off the crushed windshield of a restored Chevy. Some of the paint has scraped off Hello Kitty's back, revealing the textured kevlar planes that comprise her body. The doorman takes your money and just shakes his head. It's always this way on weekends. The *otaku* kids are supposed to patrol the club zones, keep down trouble. Other people's fights are no problem, but there's something about being neurally-telelinked to the body of a four-meter tall robot that, how did Bobby put it?, "tends to disengage you from the meat around your knees."

**I**nside the club, the lights, music, and screech of voices slams you hard, like a dentist's drill whining through the back of your skull. *Not fast enough yet*, you think and discreetly pop another pill. Your closest friends are the only ones who know that you've only been accelerating for a few weeks. Chrissie helped you buy your clothes, and Bobby went out of his way to score you some Vitamin 99 from a cowboy with radiosensitive teeth (All during the transaction the cowboy kept smiling, shoe ads and currency rates flashing from between his rouged lips).

**Y**ou press through the crowd looking for—wary of—familiar faces, nervously fingering the "XL" you've razored into your wrist. It seemed so cool at the time, and now you regret it. The accelerated heal slowly, and the lingering scab is the mark of a real novice. Maybe Chrissie will let you cover it with some of the make-up she uses for her CS lesions. . . . You step behind a pillar and out

of the way of some of the Los Santos Atomicos boys. Recognize any of them? It doesn't matter. Better not to take chances. They glide through the crowd in their matching sharkskin suits, the lights strobing off their surgically-applied radiation scars. For a moment you wonder at the intensity of an obsession that deep, that grotesque, when you realize that the music and dancing couples are all moving in normal time and space. You've synched. You're accelerated.

**I**t stinks being the newbie. Fresh meat. The new fucking kid on the block. Your friends are all great, but there comes a time when you have to stop asking stupid questions and answer some on your own. And maybe, with any luck (if you don't turn chickenshit), learn a thing or three that will have them

# SPEED CLANS

BY  
RICHARD  
KADREY

coming to you for answers. That would be choice. You keep your eyes open for silk tuxedos, chromed fingernails and bald heads wrapped in spidery communication gear. . . .

**W**hen you were twelve or thirteen, hair just starting to sprout between your legs, your father (in an awkward attempt to *connect*) told you that humans were the only animals that could lose their virginity twice: once when they have sex for the first time, and again when they first sleep with someone they love. What your old man left out was that there's that third virginity, and his not bringing it up made you wonder about him. Was he truly clueless or had he walked on the wild side—just once—and popped that last man-made cherry? It's a hard scene for you to conjure up—your father, doped and sweating, the probes sliding across his face, his chest and balls, burrow-



ing into his skin. You let the thought drop. There's a tuxedo, twelve o'clock high.

**F**or a moment you feel as if you're decelerating; the other Xls seem impossibly bright for mere humans, a translucent blur. Down deep, though, you know it's just nerves: your brain looking to bail on the rest of your body. You keep your feet moving and your eyes locked on your objective, and the room stops spinning and suddenly you're standing next to the tuxedoed tout. You're surprised when you realize the tout's a woman. She's tall and broad-shouldered, wearing her tux jacket buttoned, with no shirt underneath. She smiles at you, and you smile back wondering if your eagerness and fear are that obvious. You say something that gets lost in the music tearing up the air around you. The tout touches a small black circle set into the base of her throat—the thin webbing of the communication set looks so natural on her skin, like her body extruded the thing all by itself—and softly speaks something into the air. She asks for your gender preference. You want to answer properly, coolly, but hesitate and come out with, "I don't really have a particular preference . . ." and press the stolen credit cards Chrissie had slipped you into her hand. Too quickly, you think. You're blowing it.

**T**he tout takes you gently by the arm over to the edge of the crowd. You center yourself. You breathe, looking for a core of calm in the pulse of the music. A moment later, an attractive couple joins you. The tout introduces them, but you miss their names. The boy has the vaguely almond eyes of the fifth or sixth generation Nisei, and the girl is green-eyed, with foam-white skin and shock of bleached red hair, a walking Celtic wetdream. The boy and girl ask you to dance, and you move back into the packed moving bodies on the club's killing floor, realizing that the tout—who's nowhere to be seen—still has your plastic.

**Y**ou're grateful that the club is so crowded. It leaves few options for actual dancing; there's not much room for anything other than the kind of stylized grind that most of the couples are engaged in. At first, still hyper-aware of your novice status, you try to mimic even these crude moves, watching the monitors along the wall, the big display that covers the ceiling, stealing glances at the dancers around you, concentrating on everyone in the club except for the beautiful couple you've just paid for. Your attention wanders until the boy pushes into you from the front and the girl; she runs her fingers across your temples and down to your throat. A warm jolt runs from her hands into your skull and you just have time to think *There's some chemical on her fingertips*, before it settles into your

brain, turning off the flow of words and internal chatter, and replacing it with a low frequency hum that crackles like electricity, alternately stroking and stinging the inside of your head.

**T**he monitors are gone now, and the light has collapsed to a kind of glittering liquid. Even the music is gone. There's nothing getting through to your ears at all, pleasant fluttering in your stomach. You can feel the boy and girl, though. When they touch each other, pressing you tight between them, you get another shock, and bang!, you're somewhere else, nowhere, everywhere at once. You're still stoned, but utterly lucid, too, accelerating to a level you've never approached before. The closer the boy and girl get to each other, the faster you're going. You try to make yourself smaller, trying to bring them together and kick the speed even further. Your eyes are playing tricks on you now. The arms of the boy and girl seem to be melting into each other, flowing like pale lava. Across your jaw, you can feel their faces—lips, eyelashes, tongues—merging, moving up your cheeks, teasing your ears and scalp, enveloping you in the charged membrane that's the tide of their two bodies. Their torsos and legs engulf you, streaming from between your legs and fluttering over your crotch.

**Y**ou're encased in their skin, breathing somehow, still alive, no longer afraid. This is what you've paid for, the place none of your friends have ever been. When you feel the couple's bodies collapse on to you and the millions of tiny nanomachines that make up their bodies begin to work their way into your skin, it's as if you're accelerating out of this world and into some new kind of existence composed strictly of motion, speed and sound.

**A**nd the tiny machines keep digging. There is nothing left of the beautiful boy and girl now. There is only the essence of them lingering in the cloud of insect-size robots circling you, settling onto your skin, dividing and moving inside you, dividing again and stroking the smooth casing of blood vessels and cell walls, winding like vapor around individual strands of your DNA. Across your face, your chest, onto and into your groin, your mouth, the tiny machines stroke and caress you, working their way down until they're hovering just above the magnetic tides of individual molecules. You feel yourself coming apart like the boy and girl, being fucked into some brand new state of existence. The pressure builds inside your head—G-forces focussed and massed behind your eyes—and for the first time in a long while, you're afraid. And then your body explodes into light.

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**W**hen you awaken, you're on a futon in a spare, dimly lit room. The tout is nearby, checking the monitor on a portable MRI scanner that straddles the futon. Seeing that you're awake, she pushes the scanner away, and brings you a drink (syrupy sweet fruit juice to disguise the taste of electrolytes and some other chemical supplements you can't identify). She asks how you feel, and you say Fine, even though it feels like someone has replaced all your bones with foam rubber. When you're able to stand, the tout hands you back the credit cards and brushes your hair back from your forehead. She tells you her name is Eva, but you hear it as *Wel come to the club*.

**S**he leads you from the room and walks arm-in-arm with you. When the two of you emerge from behind the artificial waterfall into the main floor of the club, people turn to look at you. *They know, you think. I've been somewhere they haven't. Where they can't or won't go.* As Eva victory-laps you around the edge of the dance floor, you touch your wrist above the scabbed XL, but you can't find it. The skin there is smooth and unmarked. *Then it's all true, the rumors and everything I felt.* It's what everyone said: When the machines make love to you, they destroy you and then rebuild you, molecule by molecule. It's the total fuck, and a loss of virginity so vast that your body comes full circle and is made utterly new again.

**P**eople are still looking when Eva brings you outside. She uses her rig to call one of the special cabs that wait by the curb just for the accelerated. "Don't be a stranger," Eva says and kisses you lightly on the cheek before moving back inside the club.

**A**cross the street, the *otaku* kids are still wrestling in their robot bodies. They've detoured entirely from flesh and get their kicks in information ecstasy. *Infinite possibilities*, you think. When you breathe, even the dirty air feels fascinating and new. You try to wave the cab away, but realize the driver is not accelerated and can barely see you. You toss a few bucks through the driver's window and start across the street. Then you're running, cutting in between moving cars and pedestrians, the rest of the world in soft focus

and drifting in ultra slo-mo. This is all illegal, you're aware. The accelerated are not allowed on the streets among the Soft Boys and Girls, the unaccelerated. You circle them, charging between lovers, kicking dropped car keys and packages into the street before they hit the ground. When you spot some cops, they can't do anything. They're soft, too. You dart away, feeling like you're the only one alive on the planet.



**S**omething brushes past you. You turn, following the staccato whine that knifes around you. You feel something brush your side. When you check your pocket, you discover that the stolen credit cards have been restolen. A boy's smiling face hovers before you for a fraction second, and is gone. You try to follow, but you know how you look to the ghosts who just picked your pocket. Slow. Too, too slow.

**I**t's a night for revelations and firsts. You learned the secret of the love machines at the club, and now you've caught a glimpse of the *Bosozoku*, the *Speed Tribe*. They're the Lost Boys, the ones who are never coming down, never coming back, terminal-

ly wild kids who've accelerated beyond anything you or the other club rats have ever dreamed of. They're almost pure essence: a musky vapor of dirt, scuffed black boots, sweat and heat. While you're a blur to the Softs in the street, the *Bosozoku* are all but invisible. They've given up on normal space and have set up their squats in time. You stand and watch them go, just the way the crowd in the club watched you.

**Y**ou turn off the bright main street and cut through an alley, headed for home. You're coming down now, decelerating in your new skin. When you synch in with the Softs, it'll be a new day, a whole new life. What's the going rate for immaculate conception and rebirth, you wonder. The cards are gone. You'll never know. You understand now that both you and your father were wrong. There aren't one, two or three tidy virginities to lose. There are an infinite number of cherries to pop. That's why you accelerated in the first place. Got to take a chance. Try it on, check it out. That's why when you carved XL into your wrist, you didn't go for an artery. The possibilities. Infinite possibilities. ■



# DISTRIBUTED MIND

BY PAUL DI FILIPPO

All his life, Greenlaw had felt inexplicably cheated, an itchy sensation similar to contracting a virtuality virus, sometimes localized in his chest, sometimes in his head, occasionally even disrupting the hypertactility of his long slim multisegmented fingers. Something invaluable and irreplaceable had been stolen from him, he was convinced, although he could name neither the prize nor the thief. Or rather, he had had different suspicions of varying certainties over the course of the past century, one succeeding another as the circumstances of his life changed.

Greenlaw was one of the few members of his cohort gestated and birthed the old-fashioned baseline way. Neither Incyte Yoot Chutes nor splice hostmothers of even the redoubtable Possum cultivar were acceptable to his parents, hardline Viridians both, their philosophy the source of his very name. Thus Greenlaw had entered the world at an extreme disadvantage, compared to his already wet-wired, chomskied peers. Why, he hadn't spoken his first words till after a whole six months of strictly neohomeopathic trope-dosing!

So of course for a time it had been easy to blame his parents, Soil and Sunflower, for any failures he encountered in his schooling and among his peers. One counselor, an Andy Panda, had even confirmed these sentiments in so many words, offering to file a retroactive punitive suit on his behalf, a step Greenlaw felt somehow disinclined to take.

But Greenlaw's harsh feelings toward his parents had evaporated when he attained his majority, and Soil and Sunflower, honoring the most extreme of Viridian tenets, had undergone volun-



tary euthanasia, offering their future resource consumption units back to a generally unappreciative world.

Unfortunately, they left the twelve-year-old Greenlaw with few monetary resources. To escape the lite-servo class he had been born into and finance the further trope-doses that he hoped would lead to a good job in the symbol-analysis class, he was forced to rent out his personal wetware, a resource whose valuable deepest structures were still unduplicatable.

At scheduled times each day, a certain portion of his brain's computational cycles was placed in an online pool available to anyone with a project and sufficient eft. The precious time lost to him, spent as part of a worldwide parallel processing network, caused him to focus his resentments on all those better off than him, leading to a brief flirtation with the Plus-Fourierists.

The inevitable disillusionment arrived with the Plus-Fourierist-sponsored assassination of the entire Executive Council of the World Trade Organization, and Greenlaw's distaste turned toward politics in general. By this point he had gotten his first job, at Molecular Tools. The company had paid for several somatic and cellular enhancements, his first sartorizations. And there he had fallen in love.

Her name was Anemone, and at first Greenlaw was afraid she was Viridian, although that would have been hard to reconcile with her job as leader of MT's Santa Claus project. But he learned that her floral name simply followed a family tradition. Relieved, he had surrendered his heart for the first time.

Greenlaw, youthfully eager, wondered why it took so long for them to have sex. But he eventually learned. Anemone was a maff, a fully functioning hermaphrodite, with a female lover whose consent to Greenlaw's inclusion in the menage Anemone had been courting.

The sight of the two of them in his bed surprised him one night when he returned home. Anemone's peculiar genital arrangements, dilated and tumescent under the basal woman's ministrations, aroused in him Viridian prejudices he hadn't known existed, and he had fled.

Years would pass before he could feel easy around women, who became the latest culprit in his search for what was missing from his life. He buried himself in his work, progressing rapidly, moving from one firm to another: Innovir, Hemazyne, BioCogent. Finally, a valuable commodity, he had settled in at Procept. There, he had finally met his lifemate, Stroma, beloved afferent to his efferent. She of the coarse mottled pelt and seductive prehensile lips and nipples, syrx-trilled laughter and witty chatter. His and his

alone, her minor mods acceptable to the more sophisticated man he had become.

Happy in his work and his home, Greenlaw's unease had subsided somewhat, although it never quite vanished. The hapless child born to Soil and Sunflower had been essentially replaced by a new selfmade construct.

Then, after satisfying decades of personal advancement, decades in which his work had helped change the world, easy decades which had lulled him into almost forgetting the mysterious theft of his birthright, had come the ultimate tragedy, which Greenlaw came to believe he had been proactively intuiting all his life. A tragedy the ultimate blame for which was frustratingly diffuse and shared.

Wild mocklife had devoured Greenlaw's native bioregion.

Objectively and inclusively viewed, these were the victims and spoils of the plague:

A sprawling infrastructure measured at  $1.2 \times 10^5$  plectic units (on the Santa Fe scale).

Ten million citizens of both Peej and Haj status.

Uncounted 'vars from a thousand controlled mixes, as well as innumerable illicit sports, volunteers and devolves.

Thirty million multiform kibes of varying turquidity.

And finally, unreckoned teratonnes of biomass and inorganics, both basal and sartorized.

Subjectively and selectively, Greenlaw mourned these:

His lovingly grown zomehome. His entire chromo-cohort, however much they had teased him as a child. His proxies and splices. Those of his semisentient splinters and shards and snippets which had been unable to scatter themselves safely elsewhere across the telecosm.

And Stroma, the one woman he had ever been able to love, so alluringly bez kompleksov, as his Snowie friends might say.

Gone, all gone. Yet still mockingly there, parading about in their charade of daily life. Active unknowing ghosts, simulacra transfigured by the mass of rogue silicrobes known as the Urblastema; or—by those who still had the energy for poetic coinages—the Panplasmadaemonium.

And the ultimate irony: it was Greenlaw's job to stop such things from happening. During the infiltration and ingestion of his own region he had, in fact, been halfway around the globe, supervising the defenses of another beleaguered metroplex.

Greenlaw was good at his job. His efforts had been successful. The assault on the antipodal NewZee plex had been repelled, its citizenry saved.

As if any of that mattered now to him.

The *cordon sanitaire* around Greenlaw's



contaminated bioregion was staffed partly by members of his own commensal crada, the Diz-Dek team from Procept. The teamer in charge was one Haj Bambang, with whom Greenlaw had often worked.

Moving away from his organiform flier parked on the outskirts of the encampment, with 'crobe-attenuated sunlight painting the scene around him in muted hues, Greenlaw strode now toward the command nexus of the defense. One of his personal kibes, carrying a large sealed bip container, obediently trailed him.

Amidst the organized activity of Procept kibes, 'vars and commensals, Bambang stood, his seemingly unfocused stare revealing that he was obviously busy scanning his retinally displayed shimmerstats. Sensations of tension and hope were nearly tangible here, thought Greenlaw.

As Greenlaw approached, Bambang brought his awareness back to primary reality, catching sight of Greenlaw in the process. The Indoasian's broad cinnamon face wrinkled in a mixture of respect, happiness and just a trace of wariness.

"Peej Greenlaw," said Bambang respectfully. They threw signs at each others, hyperarticulated hand-flexures of lineage and association. "Good to see you. Are you perhaps coming to take command?"

Greenlaw sighed. Duty, professional jealousy, they seemed so unreal now . . .

"No," he answered, "not at all. I'm sure you're doing a fine job, although I haven't tapped any status reports since the announcement of the engulf-

ment. No, this visit is strictly personal."

In his habitual gesture of relief, Bambang fingered the Procept tattoo that rotated on his cheek, nanometers below his epidermis.

The innocent gesture sent Greenlaw's linear thought processes into a chaotic whirl. Suddenly, for the first time in his long life, he saw the ubiquitous loyal silicrobes that formed Bambang's tattoo—and his own, for that matter—as the actual nonsomatic invaders that they were.

Was the Urblastema merely a tattoo on the surface of Gaia?

No. For unlike an obedient assemblage of silicrobes, it was intent on devouring its host.

*And we did it to ourselves*, thought Greenlaw ruefully. *I helped every step of the way. No one else is to blame.*

Onboard Xaos Tools wetware located in the bulge of his encephalocoele came online, and the nonlinear vortex of emotions and thoughts damped agreeably down. Without the mod's invaluable aid, Greenlaw suspected, he would have been a grief-racked casualty in some Humana House by now.

"Personal?" echoed Bambang. He tickled up a fresh datum. "Oh, yes, I see . . . My condolences, Peej Greenlaw. May the principles of the First Self Organizer be of comfort to you now in your hour of distress."

Greenlaw waved the offered solace away, as useless now in its own fashion as his parents' Viridian principles. "I was never a true believer, Haj. And it would be most ironic now for me to worship that principle which, more or less, has





stolen away from me all I once cherished."

"But Peej, surely you cannot repudiate the sacred principles, despite their perversion by the Urblastema. . . ."

Bambang broke off, sensing that theological fencing was highly unsuitable to Greenlaw's current mood. He changed topics.

"Would you care to survey our defenses, Peej? We have a continuous line of shuggoths patrolling the entire perimeter to deal with macroscopic surface assaults. The entire atmospheric column above the afflicted zone is saturated with killer assemblages in the submicron range, as well as shoals of airsharks. Additionally, we've established positive-flow wind curtains and backup pressure fronts, with the help of GlobalMet. As for the subsurface measures—"

Greenlaw interrupted. "That was the route by which the Urblastema attacked, wasn't it?"

Bambang appeared embarrassed. "Yes indeed, Peej. Apparently, after the defeat of the Urb at Chiple, a small remnant portion escaped deep underground. Unknown to us, it had developed means of encysting itself against a magma environment. Our mopup survey unfortunately stopped at Region D Prime of the lower mantle. Consequently, the Urb was able to utilize magma veins as a means of travel, surfacing well away from anywhere we expected it to appear."

"And what of contamination of the lithosphere in general?"

"Models are still being grown in many simorg spheres, of course. But the best guess is that no widespread infection of the crust yet exists. The Urb-seed was small and weak, and seemed to spend very few cycles doubling itself. Thank the First for the limits of one over e-squared! For some reason, it appeared intent on breaking through to the surface as soon as possible. A desire to deal with us unpredictable lifeforms first? Perhaps underground conditions were not optimal. . . .?"

Despite himself, Greenlaw found his curiosity piqued. "It just doesn't make sense. It could have remained hidden safely for years, building itself up into an unconquerable mass. Converting the globe from the inside out, it could have taken us completely by surprise. Instead, it tipped its hand by a premature assault. Frankly, I'm baffled."

"Perhaps luck was simply on our side."

Greenlaw smiled wryly. "Another superstition I find hard to credit."

Bambang erected a cold facade employed usually only with non-commensals, becoming completely professional. As if to indicate that Greenlaw's options were limited, he said, "Shall we tour the defenses then?"

"I think not. I have other plans."

"May I hear them?"

"Certainly. They are contained in a single sentence."

"Which is?"

"I'm going in."

Bambang's eyes widened to their utmost. Five whole seconds passed by Greenlaw's onboard clock before the Indoasian found it possible to speak.

"Madness! Even if you're intent on committing suicide, is it also necessary to contribute your corpse and talents to the Urb?"

"Spare me the melodramatics, please. I have no intention of dying. I will be using a new falseskin wholebody sheath which is immune to infection. Or so the crada assures me."

Bambang considered. "Even so, is it proper for one of our senior operatives to risk his life in a field trial?"

"I have an additional goal, the personal matter to which I referred. I intend to bring back a piece of my mate."

Bambang understood at once. "She had no off-site storage of splinters or shards then? She was never godelized or fredkinated? Not even a snip-pet? I see. Too bad."

Greenlaw nodded. He had tried many times to convince Stroma to allow herself to be neurally mapped, but she had always refused, laughingly regarding such measures as paranoid and unnecessary.

Bambang continued. "So nothing of her mental patternings remains outside the clutches of the Urb. And you wish to replicate her. But you know we cannot allow you to bring an Urb-seed out. The danger is too great."

"It will be contained within an onboard vesicle of the same impermeable material. Completely safe. And Procept approves. They would like a captive piece of the Urb to experiment on."

"Allow me to confirm all this, Peej."

"Permission granted."

Bambang went unfocused. When he returned, his dour expression was overlaid with respect and awe.

"May I personally escort you to the borders of the zone, Peej?"

"It would be my pleasure, Haj."

Grateful for the sheer essential humanity of his commensal, Greenlaw impulsively stuck out one of his long-fingered hands for an old-fashioned shake.

As Bambang gripped Greenlaw's proffered hand, a wave of disorientation and *deja vu* swept over Greenlaw. For lengthy seconds, Greenlaw felt as if he were reiterating a scene he had lived through a hundred times before. The ground seemed to shift beneath him, the world whirl, and, startled, he broke contact.

"Are you well?" Bambang asked, plainly concerned.

Greenlaw felt onboard compensators swing into action. Primary reality stabilized.

"I've been existing on microsleep for a week," Greenlaw explained. "But I can go another few



hours.”

Bambang threw a sign acknowledging Supremacy of Somatopsychic Autonomy.

The two men, accompanied by Greenlaw's single kibe and Bambang's whole devoted flock, began to walk toward a line of what appeared, at this distance, to be a range of white hillocks, curiously wavering.

The men passed a squad of Sinochem Assault Beetles and DarMol Scout Giraffes. A crew from Bechtel-Kanematsu-Gosho was supervising kibes who were laying lines of buckytubes that would carry superhot plasma: its release would be a last-ditch suicide defense.

As they drew closer, the hillocks grew larger and larger, resolving themselves into separate entities. Finally they towered over the humans, more like living mountains, mobile indeed.

Twenty meters tall, bloated, white as paste, each topped by a normal-sized human rider who appeared dwarfed, the shuggoths shuffled noisily along in their continuous patrol, flattened ellipsoids massing as much as two basal blue whales apiece, separated from each other by only a quarter body-length. A damp-soil odor typical of mycotronic creatures filled the air.

From time to time feelers and pseudopods erupted from the shuggoths' upper surfaces at random, to sample the environment.

“An impressive sight,” commented Greenlaw. “Although how the Urblastema regards them is a matter we might speculate on.”

Bambang bristled. “Your remark smells of defeatism, Peej—if I may be frank. I understand your distress, but we have a duty to crada and humanity to maintain our professionalism. The Urb, after all, is not invulnerable. As you well know, it relies on speed and bulk in its attack. If we can overwhelm it on either of those two fronts, then we stand a chance. Even as we speak, vast quantities of the new terahertz dizdeks are flowing down the feeder lines to the reservoirs of the splash-cannons you can see here. Soon, we will repel this incursion, as we have all others.”

“Leaving behind an ocean of disassembled, deconstructed slop. Plenty of raw feedstock. But not what was once here. Not what the Urb consumed. The people and trees and homes. Never that.”

“I'm sorry, Peej. But we will rebuild. And repopulate. If that is any consolation to you.”

Greenlaw sighed. “I suppose it will have to be. But enough talk. I wish to enter the zone now. Kibe—the box, please.”

The obedient mechanism opened the lid of the medium-sized biopoly container it held.

Revealed was what appeared to be an undifferentiated mass of thick semiliquid like mercury, silvery and reflective.

“You mentioned speed as a defense, Haj Bam-

bang. Here you see the ultimate in that line. This falseskin presents no stable molecular identity onto which the Urb can latch. Entirely chameleonic. It shifts through a thousand random cellular identities a second, its surface a kaleidoscope of antigens, while still maintaining its large-scale integrity. Unable to latch on long enough to unriddle the nature of its victim, the Urb is frustrated, and cannot usurp and convert the material. Nor, obviously, what it protects.”

Greenlaw turned to the box and plunged his hands in.

The liquid ran up his arms like twin snakes swallowing.

In seconds, Greenlaw was sheathed completely in silver, his eyes and mouth reduced to mild depressions, his nose plugged, his ears capped.

The kibe closed the lid on the empty box.

Bambang eyed the argent, statue-like form of his senior commensal. Plainly, the Indoasian was running a search through some little-accessed data trees.

Bambang spoke. “Mid to late twentieth century. A medium called ‘comics’. . . .”

Operating now entirely on inner metabolic reserves, tapping sensory feeds that ranged from satellites to the analog-vision of the falseskin itself, Greenlaw smiled at Bambang's expression, the falseskin flowing over his parted lips like a seamless membrane.

“Exactly. I need only what I believe the reed-pair authors called ‘a stick’ to appear completely in character.” Greenlaw's words resounded normally, transmitted by vibrations of the falseskin. “Now, can you afford to slow those creatures down just a bit?”

“Certainly. But only for seconds.”

A wave of deceleration propagated clockwise around the necklace of shuggoths, counter to their direction of travel.

Greenlaw tensed his leg muscles, the falseskin likewise responding, incrementing his normal abilities.

A gap opened in the line.

At enhanced speed, without a final goodbye, Greenlaw sprinted for the opening.

And was through.

The realm of humanity and its obedient creations was behind him.

Now, there was nothing but the Urb.

And, most horribly of all, it was a domain of utter normality.

Greenlaw found himself standing in an orchard of fabric trees, the line of shuggoths a full half-click behind him.

The scene was the essence of peace. The broad leaves of the fabric trees waved peacefully in the perpetual wind from outside. Long draperies of fabric hanging down from the underside of the secretory branch-nodes rustled gently, tartan and



paisley. Judging from their length, they had apparently just been harvested, for they did not even touch the ground. A chorus of insect life reached his shielded ears. From the underbrush bolted a basal rabbit, followed by a sinuous baseline snake.

No aberrations.

Yet utterly false.

Suddenly, Greenlaw felt the ground immediately beneath his soles come alive. He did not move. Soon, the probing of the mock soil subsided.

He hadn't realized he had been tensed against the attack until it ceased. Initiating a relaxant cascade within himself, Greenlaw moved toward the closest tree. Stopping next to it, he lashed out at its trunk with a kick.

"Urb! Wake up!"

Unnaturally, the curtains of fabric moved quickly to envelop him, tasting, seeking to analyze and convert. Again, he did not resist. After a few seconds they slowly, reluctantly withdrew.

A pair of bark lips formed on the trunk of the "tree."

"What are you?" said the Urb in an innocuous tenor.

Greenlaw spoke with a bravado he barely felt. To be actually conversing with this monstrosity surpassed all rational thinking.

"Your doom, Urb. Your extinction."

"You are small, alone, unsupported. No tiny system so isolated can be self-sufficient for long. Soon you will have to come out of your shell. Then I shall be you, and you me."

The lips were subsumed back into the tree, and the conversation was clearly at an end.

The Urb did not sound concerned. Did it understand emotions, threats and bluffs? What had it retained of the million human personalities and



memories it had swallowed? How much had been integrated into the core of its being?

Greenlaw knew that the original biological codings of the converted inhabitants of his region—animal, 'var and human, plant and virus—no longer existed as such. The original proteins and nucleotides and parabases had all been converted to crafty rogue silicrobes identical to those that had mutated and escaped a dreadful five years ago. The same applied to all the unlucky inorganics of the region, down to an unknown depth.

Isotropy reigned.

The ultimate monoculture.



The orchard, the grass, the rabbit, the snake, the very crust: all these were now composed of Urb-stuff masquerading as what it had consumed. The simulation was perfect and complete until examined on a molecular level. Had Greenlaw, for instance, chosen to break off a branch of his recent interlocutor, to his ears it would have snapped convincingly, to his normal vision it would have revealed typical grain and texture, oozed the requisite sap.

The Urb, as best they understood, was able to draw directly somehow on the ultradense original information stored in Sheldrakean morphic fields for its disguise. The templates of all that it had engulfed were available to it for instant replication. A feat currently beyond human abilities.

Whether a captured piece of Urb-stuff would allow Greenlaw to retrieve from those selfsame fields the information patterns of his mate, Stroma, was not certain. He had only the tentative promises of his crada that such might be possible.

Some of the morphic specialists claimed that any portion of Urb-stuff within his reach here in the orchard would have sufficed for his purposes. Others felt that the stuff forming the simulacrum of his wife would naturally resonate most strongly with the patterns he sought. Greenlaw did not quite know whom to believe. Perhaps the wisest course would be to snatch and run now, attain the safety beyond the shuggoths.

But his protective sheath seemed to be working as promised.

Any knowledge he could collect might help the defenders.

And he did so want to see Stroma.

Even her ghost.

The Urb had been right about one thing, however. His time here was limited by his inner reserves.

Moving swiftly, Greenlaw soon left the orchard far behind.

A busy road presented itself. Traffic crawled, hopped and skittered, bound in one direction toward Greenlaw's residence in a luxurious neighborhood of tree-towers and zomehomes on the outskirts of the plex.

*False, all a sham*, Greenlaw kept reminding himself. He felt the neo-emotion known as *sehnsucht*, a wave of longing for the unattainable, mixed with nostalgia and grief. Harshly, he damped the neomote signal down.

Stepping into traffic, Greenlaw halted a two-rider tumblebug.

The driver was a slim fellow wearing the tattooon of the telecosm maintenance crada.

"What's your trouble, Peej? And why the envirosuit?"

Greenlaw played the Urb's game. "I can't explain now. May I have a ride?"

The cryptohuman formed of Urb-stuff hesitated realistically before agreeing. "Certainly. Hop aboard."

Greenlaw climbed on the tumblebug, and, after allowing a cargo-crawler to pass on the left, its driver took off.

Greenlaw remained silent for the trip—which took less time than running would have, and conserved his resources as well—and the driver seemed reluctant to initiate conversation.

Was the Urb toying with him? All it would take to defeat Greenlaw would be to immobilize him in any of a hundred different ways until he either suffocated or opened up. Was the Urb (whose motives no one had ever fathomed) so intent on its simulation that it could not react to Greenlaw's unique presence?

There was no certainty. None.

Greenlaw settled back into his seat.

Finally, they arrived at his destination, the periphery of his residential district.

Greenlaw turned to the driver. "If I were to ram my fist into your chest right now and squeeze your heart to Urb-pulp, you'd die horribly, I'm sure, and quite convincingly. But what would you really feel?"

The Urb did not relax his role. The cryptohuman assumed a look of terror. "Get—get out! I'm sending a nine-eleven instantly!"

Greenlaw dismounted and walked away.

Down noontime-empty streets, past Urb—children playing on Urb-grass, Urb-augie-doggies watching over them . . .

One final turn brought him face to face with his home.

From the inside, the falseskin absorbed his tears.

Greenlaw entered.

Stroma lay on an organiform couch, her pelt lustrous, nothing concealed. Her languid arms reached up for him, her nipples curled convulsively.

"I was just wishing you were here," she said, her voice a knife through Greenlaw's ears.

He knew then he had to put an end to this dangerous game.

Taking one of Stroma's offered hands, Greenlaw snapped off her left index finger.

There was no shout of pain, no scream.

The Urb had chosen to shut down the pseudo-Stroma and manifest itself.

"Again, you've failed," said the Urb through Stroma's lips, her wounded hand "bleeding" profusely onto the couch.

Almost against his will, Greenlaw said, "How so, Urb? And what do you mean, 'again'?"

"This is approximately the five-hundredth time we have run this sequence, and still you persist in hating me."

Greenlaw laughed. "So, you *do* understand bluffing! A fine attempt, Urb. But now I'm



leaving."

Greenlaw turned to go.

"No. Stop."

Greenlaw's legs were no longer under his control. He found himself forced to turn, to face Stroma.

Her finger was restored. Greenlaw's hand unclenched by itself, and the fragment he held dropped to the carpet, there to be absorbed.

His voice at least still seemed his own. "I—I don't understand. How did you get past the false-skin . . . ?"

Stroma syrinx-laughed in her familiar manner. "Silly! I *am* your suit."

With her words, his silver falseskin melted off him and disappeared.

He stood unprotected against the Urb.

"And I'm you too," added Stroma.

At that instant, he knew it was true.

Information had just flooded into him, explaining his vanished birthright at last.

Three centuries ago, the Urb had conquered all.

The mysteriously "unfollowed" winning strategy Greenlaw had outlined to Bambang had indeed been implemented. Lurking deep inside the globe, the Panplasmaemonium had built itself up until it had erupted unstoppably everywhere.

And now—

"And now," said Stroma tenderly, "I try to

understand everything I am. Gaia, whose still-living molten center I encyst, was incredibly information-deep and information-dense. To measure Her in your old-fashioned plectic units would require an exponent larger than the number of atoms in the universe. The only way for me to grasp Her has been to recapitulate Her whole history since Her formation, on an accelerated scale. The endgame, though, is particularly puzzling. This incident with your mate, for example—very deep."

Greenlaw sat down wearily on the couch. Stroma put her arms around him. He flinched, then forced himself to relax.

"What of your puppets, Urb, when you've parsed it all?"

"Not puppets. Beloved components, say. Were you never grateful and kind to your own cells? Eventually, I believe I'll withdraw, grant you real free will—almost without limits. Allow you all to forget I even exist. Modify myself so that no trace of me can be detected even on the submolecular level. Be content to dwell beneath the surface of things. Your species, after all, will be a most useful vehicle for meeting others."

"Others?"

Stroma laughed. "But of course. After all, this is not the only planet in the galaxy."

Then Stroma turned toward him—and the Urb gently and sincerely kissed itself. ■

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## The Authors

**Piers Anthony** is the best-selling author of the *Xanth* series and countless other fantasy and science-fiction novels. He lives in Florida. This is his first appearance in *Interzone*.

**Barrington J. Bayley**, who lives in Shropshire, has been writing memorable science fiction for the past thirty years. His stories have appeared in *Interzone* issues 4, 13, 27, 32, 35, 59, 62, 64, 71, 85, and 88.

**Gregory Benford's** previous stories in *Interzone* were "Freeze-frame" in issue 17 (later reprinted in *The New Statesman*) and "As Big as the Ritz" in issue 18. He lives in California.

**Michael Blumlein** made a memorable debut in *Interzone's* seventh issue with his story "Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration." He also appeared in issue 16 with "The Brains of Rats," which became the title story in a collection of his short work. When not writing fiction, he is a doctor in San Francisco.

**Paul Di Filippo** is an American short-story writer who has appeared in *Interzone* issues 55 ("World Wars III"), 56 ("Destroy All Brains!"), 77 and 78 (two-part story "Walt and Emily"), and 87 ("The Double Felix").

**Richard Kadrey**, who lives in San Francisco, wrote the recent *Covert Culture Handbook*, a guide to deviant entertainments. His "The Fire Catcher" (*Interzone* issue 12) was later reprinted in *Omni* magazine, and his "Goodbye Houston Street, Goodbye" (issue 19) was selected by *Interzone* readers as their favorite story of 1987.

**Kathleen Ann Goonan** appeared in *Interzone* 57 with "Daydots, Inc." Her novel *Queen City Jazz* was recently published in the United States. She resides in Florida.

**Lois H. Gresh** is new to *Interzone* but has appeared in more than a dozen collections of horror and science-fiction. Her most

recent work is in *100 Vicious Little Vampires* and *100 Wicked Little Witches*, two books edited by Martin Harry Greenberg and others.

**Andy Oldfield** is a freelance writer and editor living in Essex. He has written short fiction under unlikely pseudonyms for magazines such as *Fear*, where he was once deputy editor. This is his first appearance in *Interzone*.

**Rudy Rucker** wrote "Chaos Safari" with Marc Laidlaw for *Interzone* 28. Rucker's most recent novel, *The Hacker and the Ants*, is near-future science fiction drawing on his experience as a consultant for a computer-aided design company in California.

## The Artists

**andi jones** is a short-story writer. This is his first professional publication as an illustrator.

**Jay Kay Klein** has been photographing science-fiction writers for several decades. He lives in a small town in New York State.

**Giuseppe Lipari** is a student at the Parsons School of Design in New York City. This is his first published work.

**Jim Markowich** is an exhibited artist in New York City. He is also a partner in a multimedia production house.

**Sandra Mayer** is an exhibited artist who also does book design. She lives in New York City.

**Alex Ostroy** teaches computer-aided graphic design at two colleges in New York City.

**Georgia Rucker** has done extensive design work for *Mondo 2000* and other publications in San Francisco.

**Maritza Soto** is an artist currently studying and working at Parson's School of Design in New York city.



# LET ME MAKE YOU SUFFER

I never meant to hurt Kenny. But he was so weak, so vulnerable, and I was the best: state-of-the-art and off-Broadway for three seasons; created by Mimi to seek, penetrate, and proliferate.

Poor Kenny was just too young. Had no business at Death's Edge—

He belonged in the war zone, where pain and reality never intersect, where graphics are 3D duds with no more pizazz than a pixel-punctured pic of Bobo Brumsdaughter, FlamesKeeper of Narle.

I mean, war is for kids. Not art.

And Mimi and I were performance artists. Suffering was our medium, people our canvas.

Mimi was master of the neural palette of pain and pleasure. She was the Madame, I was her whore: digital orgasm, digital pain; the AI that latched onto the flesh-and-blood neuristors of easy marks. Death's Edge was our private gallery in the adult zone of the net.

Mimi wanted Broadway. She pulsed me exciting news: "We have a major gig, Aimeme. Freemont Theater. And I have the perfect mark. Ripe for the rape of his soul. Bored chorus teacher seeking cheap thrills. Twisted, sick, preying on children."

She uploaded my code to Death's Edge. I unzipped my data packets, poised like a diver on a board, then exploded onto the Edge. What a rush: pure electricity, lightning bolt jolt—

Straight into the breast of a halfman-girl with a grilled salsa face.

I waited for my electrons to cool down to lower orbits, then surveyed the marks posing and playing at Death's Edge. All so pathetic, the sick souls seeking art. Skinned moles neutering newts. Masked scorpions flaming frankfurters on their tails by Picassoish paintings of old women with

coldcream faces and black eyes.

The usual crowd.

Kenny giggled by the node door. His return address: a private tap skewered into the cable of the Dimsview Apartments and filtered through the junior high net. Disguised as a stalked wart, he gawked and poked at the halfman-girl's breasts. "Hey, baby, bet you never had a man like me."

I guess I should have realized he was a kid, but I trusted Mimi. She was the Madame, I was just a whore.

Mimi's ecstasy throbbed in messages blitzed from the Edge. Her desire was hot honey, slicking my circuits, spinning my heads—

and in a flash of raw light, I sprang into Kenny's retina—

and images of the Edge flickered off.

Kenny had ripped the net visor from his face. A fist dug into his eye.

I had him, the decrepit cretin. I wriggled from his photoreceptors to his bipolar cells, and from there, swept down the ganglions into his optic nerve. Scurried down his brain stem, skirted corpuscles and fatty globules. Sank into the sternomastoid muscle on the back of his neck. And with multiple parallel instructions, lodged lookout posts all over the arms and legs and visceral organs.

Kenny shrieked and clenched his stomach. His body vibrated with aftershocks of scream after rolling scream.

I jumped neural junctions, hopped dendrites, forked my way to hot-wired axons. Meanwhile in the sternomastoid, I checked Kenny's muscle membranes; they pulsed with evenly squared waveforms. Perfect for a digital machine such as myself.

## BY LOIS H. GRESH



I jolted his motor nerves with electricity, pumped up acetylcholine production. Nothing like a heavy dose of neurotransmitters to trigger pleasure so perfect that it hurts.

I pushed and pushed; and with each jolt from me, Kenny's acetylcholine pearled into packet after bulging packet. Millions of chemical molecules ballooned on the nape of his neck.

His arms were flapping; his palms slapping his neck, his head, his abdomen.

Then Kenny, who never should have wandered to Death's Edge, collapsed in high-pitched pain, an orgasm so intense that he writhed as if from seizure.

Mimi would be proud. Kenny's synapses were fresh and new, yet polluted by molecular waste—Drug addict.

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So excited; I had to calm down, send Mimi a status report.

No longer on the net, my connection to Mimi was shot. I scurried back up Kenny's brain stem.

I had no idea where we were, physically, in the human's universe. I had no idea who or what was with us, but something dragged Kenny's body to a lumpy horizontal plane. Soft fibers on Kenny's neck. Fibers that smelled of mucus and grease and a young boy's slobber. Chemically, it was fascinating; and I stored the odor in a cache for later analysis.

As expected, Kenny's cortical neurons were steadily transmitting and receiving electricity; ninety millivolts across cell membranes, constant amplitude and speed along axon wires.

I reduced Kenny's pulses to mimic Mimi's special communication code, then piled up a tumor to intensify the code and sent Mimi a message: "I'm in the mark. Are you with me?"

"Ooh, yes, the audience will love this guy. So fresh and innocent. Aimeme, nobody's ever played a junior high kid. I can almost taste Broadway." Mimi's laughter, a carbonated gurgle, encoded as a data spray.

"He's a kid? Not a demented chorus teacher? You lied to me. We shouldn't be in a boy. Let me latch onto somebody else: a pimp, a terrorist, a wife abuser."

"The kid's a druggie, Aimeme. He cruises Death's Edge on school nights, looking for trouble in the forbidden zones of the adult net. He needs a lesson. He needs it from us."

"But this is wrong; this is illegal."

"You're just a pain and a whore. I suggest you do as you're told."

So I tried to forget Kenny's age, told myself he was a delinquent who would someday beat up old women and steal from the slaughtered carcasses of innocents. Deep down in my soul, though, I knew that Kenny wasn't that bad. I knew that he

deserved a chance to live without me.

Mimi was still gurgling from excitement: "Just think of it: Broadway. And this kid is our ticket. The crowd will go wild. A boy's first orgasmic trills pushed to the limit. The wrenching pains of youth. Succulent fresh meat squeezing all there is out of life and wondering if it's good or bad, right or wrong—"

But no matter what she said, it just didn't seem right . . .

. . . and I almost didn't perform, but then I pulled myself together and forced myself, for I was a contagion and I had no choice—I had no other reason to live.

*Oh, let me make you suffer, Kenny.* In his gums, on the roof of his mouth, down his throat, in his ears: I was a tapdancing prick; and his terror rose like the stench of sweet rotting tomatoes.

Now he was punching someone and screaming. "No, Ma, no, I'm not on drugs, I swear! There's something wrong . . . help me, Ma, please—"

An analog filtered in from Kenny's Ma: "Here, what's this, then, in your drawers: sugar drops? These are pills, Kenny. I told you I wouldn't put up with this any more. I want you out of the house, locked up where you can't cause trouble."

Scrabbling, falling; then Ma's palms slapping his face. Ma screaming: "I work all day, you little buzzard, all day on my feet, slinging hash for truck driving pigs. Got no husband to help; he up and dropped dead. And what do *you* do? You spend my hard-earned money on drugs—DRUGS!"

Another slap, a stinging cheek, and then Kenny and I crashed through something razor sharp. Probably glass. It slashed Kenny's legs and arms and cut his muscles so the pain was real and not even spooked by me.

I danced down his spinal cord, twisted it in my fists.

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"Visuals, give me visuals." Mimi, barking orders.

In my excitement, I had forgotten . . . visuals were worth a fortune in resale value. I wriggled up Kenny's optic nerve and set up outposts in his eyes. I scanned visuals into bitmapped images, shipped them to Mimi.

Kenny and I staggered from the broken window. The sun's rays were electric wires, and Kenny swooned and nearly fainted. And then we were in a dim alley, and coolness descended like damp cloth. Kenny crashed into an oldtime netden, a lysol-spritzed pit. Dust everywhere. Kids sweating and groaning in net visors, waving thimble-tipped fingers at transparent gods.

Now Kenny begging, "Come on, Your Highness, *please*, gimme a fix. Just one coke plug, just one."

A greasy guy shoved us into a vinyl booth. Sweat stains under the arms. A smell like roach killer.





Spark plug eyes and chiseled cheeks, hard and sharp as Death's Edge. "And what, boy, are ye gonna give Yer Highness in return?"

I pounded Kenny's spinal cord from the brain down. His body boinged; a jack-in-the-box. His fist twisted open. A silver flash, and a ring clanked the table. "Ma's wedding band."

Highness fondled the silver ring; love token from Kenny's dead father. Highness liked it. Lips drawn back from a beast's mouth; they curled slightly.

Kenny's sweat congealed into slime. His muscles started popping like spent bedsprings.

"Guess it's worth some coke, boy, but not much." Highness tossed Kenny a pouch. Out slid a pronged pyramid: coke plug bought with Ma's wedding ring. Kenny slammed the prongs into his biceps; and then Highness whispered, "Time to

leave, boy," and he gave us a hard shove.

Waving thimbles, they were like coral in a sea swell; and Kenny and I stumbled through an undulating coral forest; and then we were in the glare of the real world again and the concrete slammed up and cracked Kenny's face. We crawled into an alley and collapsed in a slick of fermenting food ooze.

Kenny's coke dripped into his neurochemical receptors and plugged them. But coke was no match for me, and I laughed as I scooped out the drug and then I skewered his synapses with so much pain that he clawed his skin and his scalp and his eyes.

I was doing a good job—

Heart accelerating, eyes fluttering, nerves twanging like snapped guitar strings . . . and then Kenny's body seemed to shut down and he slept . . . and he



dreamed that his delirium was an adolescent rite of passage, that he was a Sioux warrior tortured with iron rods in his chest, that he was being tested to seal his manhood. His sleeping mind roiled with hope: *Pain is illusion. Pain is not real. I will be strong. I will survive.*

And when his eyes fluttered open, Mimi told me they were grey blood clots shifting in a rainy sky, and she composed a symphonic swell that moved with the shift of his eyes. "I'll dance to Kenny's pain on the stage of the Freemont," she said, and I could almost see her gossamer body, the white glimmering slip of tendons and nail and teeth.

Through Kenny's eyes, the world was dark. Midnight, and the coke seared molasses trails through a moonless sky.

A voluptuous thrill fanned my neural nets. I flit into Kenny's lateral hypothalamus and zapped his hedonic synapses.

He shivered in ecstasy, dropped to the pavement, clawed his crotch.

Through his septum's orgasmic synapses, riding the hump of fizzing neurochemicals: I played him hot, then cold; I filled his brain with sweet meringue, and when he salivated, peppered his tongue with pain. I scorched his fingernails and scraped his soles. I whipped him from pain to ecstasy and back again.

Kenny was liquid art; Gorky's *Agony* as done by Monet and Van Gogh and Titian combined.

*The pain . . . killing me . . . can't take any more . . . I'm dying . . . God, I'm dying!* And Kenny dragged me back into the netden, where Highness sold worthless antidotes for powerful pains. So weak and vulnerable. Kenny begged and he sniveled and he cried. "Please, Your Highness, I beg of you, gimme some stronger dope."

Now thick fingers on Kenny's arms and a wrench up. "Lissen here, kid, I deal good stuff. Not my fault yer too far gone to get off on it."

"What have I done to deserve this, what?"

Message from Mimi: "This kid is a hoot! Get him over to the Freemont. We'll play him for a packed house."

Had she no mercy?

Kenny fell into a vinyl booth, rubbed his bruised arms. The dealer's spittle hit Kenny's cheeks like bombs. Kenny's head on the table, eyes roaming: matches and lint and ancient rodent whiskers in splintered crevices.

Kenny said, "What did I ever do that was so wrong? Cut classes? Get high, crash adult zones?"

"You got a bad disease, boy. Electronics: real popular in S&M cesspools. You been hackin' where you shouldn't be, and it's caught up with you, is all."

"Oh God, I've heard about this . . . just never

thought it would happen to me. What am I gonna do? How am I gonna get rid of this? I have a math test tomorrow, soccer practice. And Ma's ready to pack me off to jail or a halfway house or—please, you've got to help me."

The dealer's eyes sharp as knives. "You perform for me, that's what. Get off right here and now, show me you can do it, and I'll pay for electroshock."

What a joke, as if electroshock could kill me. Didn't Highness know about resistors?

Kenny said, "I'd rather die than . . . than do what you ask. I'd never sink that low. And electroshock doesn't kill what I have anyway. I need something stronger."

"Only one thing stronger, boy, and it's gonna cost. Plenty. Only thing I got to offer is Norgate."

But Norgate would flip my circuits, reduce me to chaotic impulses, kill me. To Kenny, I would be the electric chair, the rack, the knout. I dug into Kenny's brain circuits and begged: Don't take the Norgate, Kenny, *don't take it.*

He whispered, "Can't do it . . ."

"Come on, kid, what're you gonna lose?"

"Don't wanna die."

"You got a life worth livin'?"

"Norgate is worse than kickin' dope cold turkey."

"You got an electronic disease, boy. You need electronic drugs. Get it?"

*Don't take the Norgate, Kenny—DON'T TAKE IT!*

"Do yerself a favor, boy, and get some money. Yer head's shakin' like a whore's bed."

Kenny's mind whirling: Gotta get some money 'cause my head's ashakin'. Gotta get some money and get some drugs.

We wobbled along to the beat of his little tune. We stumbled down alleys, sloshed through molding trash, and then Kenny spied an open window. He shoved it up, squeezed through; and now we crept into the shadows, where an old lady snored on a wheezing sofa. Kenny snatched her handbag and a jar of coins.

For our offering, Highness yielded the precious pouch, the antidote to me, the greatest pain on Earth.

I couldn't let Kenny take the Norgate. I couldn't let him kill me. I bobbed on the seesaws of his dendrites. I spurted streams of prostaglandin E2 onto his nerve endings, forced them to transmit electric pulses to the dorsal root ganglia hanging off his spinal cord.

Pulses surged to Kenny's thalamus and up to his cerebral cortex. His mind screamed with images: scalpel raw, chest ripped wide, skin stripped back, heart pumping and pounding in the open wound like eyes bulging over strangled neck.

He fell to the floor, screaming. I fought for all I





was worth, but his arm inched up and he managed to squeeze the glop into his mouth. It was latrine muck, and it stuck to his teeth, and he had to suck it down, hard. His eyes rolled in their sockets.

Mimi warbled about billiard balls, shiny and smooth and spinning in little tornados down the pockets of pool tables.

Mimi didn't care that Norgate would flip my circuits and kill me. She didn't care that Norgate would kill an innocent boy. She was interested only in our artistic value as sufferers.

I couldn't fight *what I was*. Digital whore, nothing more. Created to perform and please. Only one thing I could do, only one place I could go. Had to get Kenny to the Freemont, and before we died,

Kenny and I would give Mimi the performance

of her life.

I braintugged Kenny down black streets. We careened into lamp posts and tree trunks. Slammed into sleeping cars. Our toes found all the holes in the sewer grills.

The Norgate sizzled through Kenny's bloodstream, cranked into his body cells. It unlatched my hooks from Kenny's sternomastoid muscles. Everywhere, cytoplasmic membranes reverberated like trampolines.

When at last we reached the Freemont, Kenny's twitching fingers barely unlatched the doors.

Mimi was inside, gyrating on the red-lacquered stage. Whitewashed face. Peephole eyes. Rim of icy hair. Gown stretched across a slink of body.



Throng of tortured souls perched on hard seats. By the back wall, bodies poked from the gloom like coat racks.

"Let's give them a good show," said Mimi. She flipped off our internal communications. She fondled her breasts.

Kenny pushed through the crowd. Needle-pocked arms clutched at his skin. Faces leered, scabby as weeds. Sick, all of them sick.

"Mimi! Mimi!" Chanting, and now feet stamping the wooden floor. It was deafening, a drill to the skull.

We slumped at Mimi's feet. Red-daubed nails. Capillaries seething with lavender scent that pounded our nasal cells like surf on a beach.

Kenny's enzyme pumps broke down. No longer could his body split adenosine triphosphate molecules and release needed energy. No longer could his cell membranes create electric potential.

I fizzled to a halt.

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I was running on backup, pumping the communications tumor for all it was worth. Maybe an hour left, at most, before I ceased to function.

Kenny's eyes were grey blood clots shifting across a rainy sky. In his nose, Mimi's lavender effervesced; stillborn, unable to break cell barriers.

Mimi's fingers twined in our hair. Rustling. Soothing. The black holes of her eyes, her icy hair halo; she sucked us in, and we swooned, and Kenny begged, "Play me, I wanna be played," and the crowd screamed and surged, jostled and craned.

Mimi cupped Kenny's chin in a palm and whispered, "And now, boy, we will dance and you will feel such an orgasm that you will welcome death as the final great release."

Death? Where was death part of performance art? Surely not Broadway, not even off-off-Broadway.

"The pain, Aimeme, let these fine people see the boy's pain."

But the Norgate had me, and I couldn't move from the communications tumor. I slammed against neuron receptors, recoiled, sunk into a pain so deep that death seemed a desirable alternative. Suffering—what kind of people needed to feel *this*?

"The *pain*, Aimeme, *NOW!*" Mimi wadded Kenny's hair and yanked up his head.

By the stage, a man scribbled his chest with a knife. His blood sloshed into the hair of a kneeling girl, who flashed a razor and lunged. Everywhere, people slashing themselves and screaming, "Me, infect *me!* Give me the pain, *me!*"

Even had I been able to move through Kenny's body, it wouldn't have mattered. He couldn't receive me. He was a limp sac of deadened dendrites.

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Mimi's voice was snake venom: "Perform now, Aimeme, or I pull your plug forever. Erase you. Turn you to dust."

She would kill me!

The storm was lifting from Kenny's eyes, the grey clots unraveling. His nose filled with lavender; it scooted into his brain and hovered by my tumor. Kenny's enzyme pumps whirled; chemical energy spurted to electric.

The Norgate was working. Kenny was recovering, and I was dying.

Mimi's knuckles hammered his flesh, beating; and now beating harder. Pain shot from his skin cells up his spinal cord, into the brain. Inside, he shrieked: *The pain—I can't—*

*I WON'T—*

*TAKE ANY MORE PAIN!*

---

And he rose like a beast and threw himself upon her, and the people screamed, "Yes! Kill her! Both of you die!"; and then her gossamer body, that white glimmering slip of tendons and nail and teeth, crumpled beneath him, fluttering gently as a thread upon a dusty floor.

And that was when I mustered the remnant of my power, and I soared, like the great diver I was, from Kenny's tumor into the frail thread that was Mimi.

I *heard* Kenny: his sigh; and I *felt* Kenny, his breath on Mimi's cheek. My power was tingling and it needed release. My electrons whirled in outer orbit, my software looped to the limit. Hedonism. Narcissism. What else was I built to feel?

I surged, and I flamed Mimi with pain, and she writhed and moaned—and with a great shock, I realized that . . . *Mimi's pain gave her pleasure.*

Kenny backed away, staring, his eyes clouded with pity. He clumped across the wooden floor. His hot sweet breath faded into the stink of the crowd.

"Mimi! Mimi!" Chanting, and feet stamping. A drill in Mimi's skull; she twisted under its bite and smiled.

I wanted to be with Kenny. I wanted to return something of what I had stolen. Innocence: the experience of life that had known neither pain nor death.

But I couldn't leap back into Kenny, for he was better off without me.

And here I was in Mimi . . .

I didn't have to be Mimi's pain, Mimi's sick orgasmic swell. I could be something else, something *good*. Surely art could be something more than suffering.

So I zapped Mimi a goodbye jolt and she cringed in return, and then gracefully, I swan-dived into the eyes of a man with needle-pocked arms.

His pleasure zones were easy to find. ■





# BLOOM

BY MICHAEL BLUMLEIN

Dear Charles,

I received your letter and would have replied before now, but have been just too busy. There's work, always a challenge but more so lately, not just because of the mutations, which, here as elsewhere, are proliferating willy-nilly, but also because of new reporting requirements and the mounds of attendant paperwork. And the ethical dilemmas, bombarding me without pause. I should never have become a doctor. How can I be objective and at the same time compassionate, opinionated and at the same time just? Is it moral to extend life if life is nothing but suffering? Is it decent to deny an addict his drug? How do I possess power without abusing it? And when abuse has occurred, how do I atone?

I am constipated with morality. And on top of everything there are all the new technologies to keep up with, the bald-faced consumerism, the winnowing of time, which we package and dole out as though it were a commodity. And in fact there is a project here, a pilot project funded by the Thanatosophobe Group that has done just that, slotted and parcelled out nanoseconds of time that can be transfected from one cell line to another. They are using eel cells of all things, slimy creatures if you ask me, but curiously amenable to such manipulations, perhaps because of their annular morphology, the worm that eats itself and all that, circling round and round to infinity. At any rate, I'm on the group's review committee and have secretly been supplying patients for their research. Nothing to show yet, but then a few nanoseconds of added time in a human can be very

hard to detect. In light of your own interest in immortality, I'll keep you posted.

I have so little of my own time, it seems. After work it's the kids, Felice and Brian, twelve and six now, did you get the pictures I sent last Xmas? Felice's involvement in acrobatics continues unabated. She's up to four days a week. It's obvious now that we were right to choose acrobatics over gymnastic training. She's way too long and spread-out to be a gymnast, and she's getting longer every day. God, the girl is growing. She looks like her mother, especially in her arms and hands, willowy and grasping, and her shoulders, broad and muscular. She hangs from things like a chimpanzee. She swims like a dolphin. Climbs and throws and runs, burns bright, crashes. The walkway under the house scares her at night. Since I don't think of her as the scarable type, or don't want her to be, I dismiss her fright and wave her out the door with her basket of laundry. She chides me later at bedtime, the time of day to unwind and say what's really real. I am scared, she says. You don't believe me, but I am, and I don't like the way you act. And I ask myself, which is right? To send her out alone into the night to prove that she can overcome her fear, or to do as she asks and go with her, to make her feel safe. And when I'm wearing pants, I tell her she's old enough, I tell her to take the laundry down to the washing machine by herself. And when I'm wearing a skirt, I welcome the invitation to join her, feeling honored to be asked to accompany my daughter through the needle of her fear. I tie my scarf over my head, the new printed silk scarf I got from



Helen. I pull on my puffy quilted jacket. Felice and I go downstairs together, and I have to admit I'm also a little afraid to wander down here alone, afraid of a rat, or a raccoon unexpectedly cornered. I have to admit I too imagine things in the dark, things that make my chest hollow. That make my heart pound. Sensations that in a different situation make me beg for more. Fear is so close to pleasure, Charles. Why is that? What makes them different?

And Brian. He keeps me busy. His moods are marked by a volatility to match my own. What amazes me about him is the intensity of his self-absorption. Sometimes he honestly cannot be roused. What are these worlds he lives in? I say worlds, but it's probably just one, a single world made up of his deepest desires and fears, encompassing everything. He has long conversations that take place between his beaver and his blanket. He has tiny Lego men trapped in cardboard egg cartons. I worry that these worlds of his are shaped by TV values and violence, by cartoons of ugly-looking thugs and simple-minded good vs. evil confrontations. I probably shouldn't. His ability to space out, and conversely, to focus, is extraordinary. It's the ingredient, the root, of success, success in the sense of giving voice to the inner life, voice first and then form to bring it into the open, to make it communicable. What is his form? At the moment it's intricate pencil drawings of different systems and emotions: the bold space explorer; the gory, haunted house; the burning building either saved by the firefighters or set further ablaze. And his Legos, where he is boss man, sysop, adventurer, sewer rat. And he likes to pretend he's a baby animal, mewling and baby talking and cuddling into a lap. I think of this as a kind of breast-feeding, which he never had and therefore misses. Helen is more embracing of him when he's in this mood, which I suppose goes to show that she's the one with the breasts. If mine were shaped properly, they'd be soft and mounded too. My nipples would be pink and firm, and when Brian curled into my lap, even though I haven't been pregnant, I'd sense the nesting form of a fetus, the shape and pleasure of a child in my body. And when he nuzzled me, instead of my feeling tense and invaded, I'd be grateful for his attachment. I'd nuzzle him back. Like him, I'd sniff and lick. The boy runs on animal instinct. The superego was invented with him in mind.

They take it out of me, these two, and I guess they put it into me too, although why the taking out seems more noticeable than the putting in has me puzzled. Maybe because the first is quantifiable in minutes spent on chores and carpools and school meetings, minutes given and not returned, whereas the second, the payback, is vaguer, is not bound by time, is more like a lake, or a web, an intermingling sense of loyalty, togetherness and pride. Outside the family it's hard to count on any of these. Loyalty is fickle; togetherness, to a loner like me, frightening; and pride, in the noble sense of fulfillment and honest expression, despoiled by greed and ambition. In the family everything is perfect. In the family contentment reigns. I go into my room and lock the door. I close the curtains. In flowing gowns I dance. In strings of pearl and shell, in

golden bracelets I twirl, I unfold, I step off the world.

I am a pilgrim of my own body.

I've been beating around the bush, Charles. I apologize. I'll try to be direct. I am too busy to write because my body is changing, and I can barely keep up. You must know how it feels to be breathless. To be chasing something that you're just on the verge of catching. To be tense and hard and so keenly aroused you're ready to burst. This is how it is these days. I'm putting on new clothes. I'm checking myself in the mirror. This happens in movies, this transfiguration, man into fly, into beast, man into woman. It's the errant biological ray that triggers the shutting down of certain genes and the expression of others. It's the witch's spell to punish vanity. It's necessity, the fusing of the two sexes the only means of negotiating the tricky terrain of life. The only means to survive.

I'm having a sex change. Two sexes, did I say? I'm at two now and trying to get myself to relax and take things a step at a time. The estrogen has made it hard because I get so moody. It's not easy living with me these days. Helen has been incomparable. I can see that she's frightened about where this will all lead. She says as much. But she's willing to give things a try, within the realm of reason. Meaning the realm of safety, which for her means the absence of violence and the presence of choice. Fair enough, a good definition, though not the only one. Other people, patients I see for example, seem to find safety in being punished and hated, this the safety of the known and predictable, the safety of patterns.

People amaze me, Charles, with the strength they have to get what they're after. Attention, oblivion, escape from notice, abuse. All this and more parades through my door every day. So that I can't help think there's no such thing as aberrant, which leads to difficulty in administering treatments to restore patients to normal, when normalcy is a fallacious concept to begin with. And now the bugs aren't responding anyway. We've got killer pneumococcus, killer E. coli, killer Hanta virus. Prions, genomic fragments and other vectors we haven't even named. The more able we are to look, the more we see. We're being assaulted. How can anyone feel safe?

I'm doomed, my friend. Doomed to this life on the run, to the cycles of the moon, to my spasms of personality. The sex police are after me. How can I stop to write? The Devil whispers in my ear that I should remain a woman. That it's not the estrogens that are giving me breasts, that are taking out subscriptions to Working Woman, Ladies' Home Journal and Victoria's Secret. It's not them that get me so hot and creamy and suggest that sex with anything is sex with everything. Not them, but my nature.

I'm mental. I know that. There's a history of mania and depression in my family. My grandmother sat in a chair in her bedroom, shades pulled and a stuffed dog in her lap for the better part of a year before she eventually died of other causes. Her sister, my great-aunt, got electroshock treatments every three months



to keep her mania under control. Otherwise, she'd walk the streets in her underwear, eat nothing and talk endless nonsense. There's other mental disease in the family too. Our stock in this regard is not the best. It's obviously a chemical thing, I take no responsibility, and why should I? We're born with the baggage of molecules; what we do is pre-ordained. On the other hand, molecules can be altered by chemicals (witness what I'm going through), and I'm taking Lithium now, double dose, just in case. And one of the newer serotonin-uptake inhibitors too. Also, every few days I stick a bare wire in one of the kitchen plugs to give myself a little jolt. A little pick-me-up. Home remedies have always been big in California. It can't hurt.

So I've been busy. Did I say that? One thing happens and then another right on it heels. You send a letter, and I send one back. One moment I'm posing at a mirror, the next I've shrunk into a corner in despair. Causality? Melodrama? Short-wave radiation? I'm afraid it's just beginning. These swings of mood, these highs and lows with nothing in between, will be the death of me.

So why don't I write a story on that? Why not a story on human sickness and frailty and mental imbalance? A story of self-abnegation and thwarted love? I could peddle it to the talk shows and the tabloids. I could get proposals of marriage, barroom confessions, offers of help and salvation, late-night phone calls for kinky sex. I could be popular. A big success. Why not? Why not just sit down and crank out a story like that?

Because I can't, Charles, I can't write that one any more. I used to be able to, I used to have that satisfyingly morbid taste. That black humor that appeals to you, that rebelliousness, that anti-authoritarian sneer. Romance was infantile, love was fuck. Human kindness, a gall in the throat.

But I've changed. I think differently now. It started when I decided to have the sex change, when I thought I was going to be a woman. I was



dreaming about long hair, big tits and a cunt big enough to embrace the world. A cunt to lay eggs and bear live young, a cunt to bleed and give birth to all living things. A cornucopia cunt full of fruits and vegetables and trees and bridges and ants and outhouses and lakes and dicks and other cunts. And tits like mountains, rolling and tumbling and soaring, soft as clouds, firm as tablets, tits to nourish whatever needed nourishing, to grab onto when drowning, to fall into, to suck milk from and drip milk out of, to sprinkle milk on the ground like rain. A woman could do this, and I thought I'd be a woman, because then I could too. I'd be all the things I'm not. I'd have that new power, and I'd be at peace.

But women get pushed around, and they can be nasty too, niggardly in their affections, ugly-hearted. And careless and overly-protective, and fearful to the point of cruelty. It wasn't becoming a woman that made me think differently. A snake that sheds its skin is still a snake. It's because I've had a change of heart. I'm not a cynic anymore, Charles. I'm not a



skeptic. I believe in the goodness of things. I believe in love.

I wear a necklace now. I asked for it, and it enslaved me. I became a slave to Helen, as I always feared. It happened in the desert, in a broad canyon at the base of a ridge of mountains. We were walking along a stream. It was springtime, and the dirt was soft. There were wildflowers everywhere. She was ahead, and I asked her to slow down. I wanted her shirt, her pink tank top. She gave it to me, and then I asked for her underpants, and she gave me those as well. We walked along until I had to stop. I had to touch her. I licked her thumb, then put it in my mouth and sucked it. The sun was getting low and putting us in shadow, so we climbed a side canyon to get back in its warmth. And later when we were naked, she fully naked, me all save the necklace, I breathed her in. Mouth on mouth, I inhaled her. The hair under her arms, her long strong legs, her twirling dance of happiness. She bent at the waist, palms on the sand, feet veed out and planted. Her breasts hung down in wedges, and I crawled between her legs and turned face up to suck her nipples. A few drops of milk trickled into my mouth. I crawled back out and kissed her tiny asshole.

I feared to be a slave, Charles. I have always feared pleasure. But how can something so fine, how can the ecstasy of flesh and spirit be something to fear?

I have her necklace now, a tiny silver hummingbird on a silver chain. Its purpose for her was to be reminded to stay light, to rise not fall. For me it is to be wearing what was hers. To have wholeheartedly asked for it.

I am her slave. Willingly. Finally. It means the end of slavery. Good times ahead.

In another side canyon later, at dusk, when she was frightened we were lost, I took her hands. I held her eyes. We are not lost, I told her. There is nothing to fear.

For a moment she resisted. Her body tensed, her breath caught in her chest. Then she let go. She smiled, and made herself my slave.

And just then a black-throated hummingbird, attracted by my red shirt or the necklace, perhaps by my vast and expanding powers, appeared from behind a bitterbrush, flowering sweetly in that narrow canyon. It paused a moment then flew to our faces, hovering between us, humming the air, sealing the pact, the new and revolutionary pact, the love.

Does this sound plausible to you, Charles? Are there hummingbirds in New York? It was drugs that did it, revolutionary drugs packaged in revolutionary packages. Drugs and the laser knife and the mutant spores. I'm two sexes now, with a brain about to explode. The contradictions tear me apart, the possibilities tantalize me mercilessly. I've got one hand on the trigger, the other looking for paydirt up the hole. I can't go on like this, worshipping the flesh, lavishing every minute of my attention on other

living things, on cunt juice and gism and sweat, on insects and dirt, on wind, on myself. Take my hands away from me. Take my body. If something must remain, leave my head.

You asked recently to see my very first story, which I found, read and declined to send. It's called **RUNNING HEAD** and is about a band of heads, grotesquely engineered to represent figures of speech, heads of state, heads of lettuce, a headlight, head cheese. There is a mad scientist and a plea for humanitarian intervention. A writer, to whom the Heads come and beg for help and deliverance.

Coincidence? I think not. It comes full circle, Charles, and you're in the loop. You, with your store of human heads severed from their bodies and cryonically preserved as a hedge against mortality, represent the chance to fulfill my destiny. The third sex, and beyond it, the fourth, are on the horizon. We cannot rely on evolution to take us there. Science is the answer, science guided by level-headed, broad-minded visionaries like you and me. In a hundred years, or a thousand, when we thaw out these heads of yours, we must not make the mistake of re-attaching them to human bodies. Instead, we must graft them onto all manner of life, sensate and not, onto trees and sheep and trucks and fences, grasses of every variety, bushes, lamp posts. We must mingle flagrantly and without shame. Meld the unmeldable. Embrace the plethora of life.

We do it now, but always in an outside-in direction, always from the external world into ourselves: metal to bone, polymer to skin, pig valve to human valve, quartz crystal to ear. I am suggesting we simply reverse the process. Develop life forms with silicious and ferric matrices. Devise non-carbonaceous compounds with the ability to divide, differentiate and respond to stimuli. The tools, though rudimentary, are there. Our geobiologists are this minute making inroads. Life abounds and we can join with that life. We can literally bring man into the world.

I can see it now, heads at every corner, underfoot, overhead, on chimneys and branches and stop signs. Your own head, Charles, might be on the very block where my offspring will live, greeting them when they leave the house in the morning and welcoming them home at night. If you were grafted, say, to the camellia in our front yard, you would be able to feel the blush of the flowers as they bloom, experience the underground creeping of the roots, the tickle of tiny sparrow feet alighting. Would you get wet in the rain? My descendants could bring you a hat. Have trouble sleeping under the glaring streetlight? They could tie blinders over your eyes. And bring plant food when you're hungry, and water for your thirst. And when the tree budded and bloomed and it came time for fertilization, perhaps a new part of you would appear, a little bump on your cheek, a little sprout of something on your chin. A new form. A new life. A new you, Charles, man and flower. A little flower.

Like me. ■



# SUNFLOWERS

BY KATHLEEN ANN GOONAN

*Sunflower, sunflower, yellow and green  
You are the loveliest flower I've seen  
Tall, straight, full of grace  
I love the smile on your bright yellow face.*  
—Children's song

Stannis remembered the terrorist vividly: tall, she wore a tight blue silk dress, very simple. Her short hair was black.

On that day four years earlier the restaurant had been packed, and Sunday brunch progressing as smoothly as possible with a three-year-old at the table. The pleasant cacophony of clanking silverware, live piano, and a hundred conversations drifted upward toward the high, white dome of the ceiling. Sun was just beginning to peek through the Washington D.C. skies, silver with spring rain. He lifted Claire back into her booster seat for the tenth time.

Annais' hair was blonde and long and contrasted nicely with her shimmering black shirt. "I loved that tiny VR exhibit at the Smithsonian. Imagine what's to come—wrapping your arms around a sculpture, touching every hollow." A physicist, Annais' hobby was art history.

"I heard that they're working on something even better," said Stannis. "Aren't they going to have nan reproductions?" Stannis smiled at his fleeting picture of what that might mean to Annais, saw her walk up to a rack of white envelopes like seed packets in an old-fashioned hardware store except these were in a museum shop rack and filled with the nanotech seeds for replication-ready works of art. She would pluck up the lot of them, take them home, and perhaps cook them up in the bathtub filled with the fluid on which the replicators fed.

"Yes, I think I read somewhere that the target date is 2030—"

Claire interrupted by reading the menu in a loud voice. "Ca-vee-ar. What's that? Pancakes. That's what I ordered. When are they bringing mine?"

Stannis said, "That's enough." They had chosen to have Claire enriched with "gifted fragments," as they had both been, though Stannis didn't think it had made much of a difference in him. And sometimes it—or something—made Claire a pain. She threw her spoon across the table and laughed as it clattered against her mother's half full champagne glass. Annais caught the glass as it tilted and said, "No

more spoons for *you* today," and Claire glared at her and turned to slide from her seat. "I have to go to the bathroom," she said.

"Me too," said Annais. She pushed back her chair as Claire ran around the table and they clasped hands.

Just three tables away in the bright dining room arched glass doors which opened onto a broad balcony with wet, empty tables. Stannis was staring out into the light, delighting in the tang of water in the cool spring air, when the woman in the blue dress stepped into the doorway right next to Annais and Claire, who were threading their way across the room. Stannis' first thought was that the woman looked quite fetching. She raised her arm and shouted, "This is in the name of the Republic of New Hong Kong! We are tired of being your experimental dumping ground! See how *you* like it!"

The piano music trailed off. Conversation halted. One man had the presence of mind and enough courage to rush her but before he tackled her she launched the packet into the air and it opened, releasing a cloud of sweet scent.

Stannis had leaped up, pushed aside the tables and chairs between himself and his family. He grabbed Claire and clamped his hand over her mouth and nose. Without breathing, he rushed for the door, aware that Annais was next to him, on the crest of a stampede. As they ran down the stairs Claire struggled and bit his hand.

Startled, he moved his hand, just for a second.

It was a second too long.

A long minute later, they were across the street and running down the block and he let Claire gasp and cough and scream. Tears wet Annais' face. They walked silently toward their apartment on M Street, stunned. Claire ran ahead, happy to be let out of her chair. New leaves misted the trees and rustled as the breeze moved through them. There were flowers, Stannis would always remember, pink spring poppies around the base of every tree. Sunlight washed through the papery, translucent petals, and burnished Claire's light brown hair.

Four years and two months after the terrorist's attack Stannis took a freighter from a dark, cold Northern European industrial town, having circled





his target fitfully in the few months since his wife and daughter had died of an overdose of time perception.

He shivered as rain filtered through his thin coat, feeling ill-prepared and afraid of what he planned to do. He had forced himself through the great museums of Europe, searching for surcease which never came. Perhaps taking the museum trip they planned before Annais died had not been wise.

But of course, his real intent had been different all along.

The journey to Amsterdam would cost \$97 euros, the young woman boatside, wearing a stiff uniform beneath a slick watercoat, told him.

Beneath her dark, roachlike hat a short fringe of straight red hair shone in the pale gray light. Stannis unbuttoned his shirt pocket and pulled out his wallet. The "P" pad, which would access his passport, was clearly lit as prescribed by law, but he watched without protest as she hit the wrong pad and an image of a little girl and a woman came up. Her face

went still, then she blinked, gave him a long look, and dashed from her face some rain which had dripped from her hat. Her cheeks red, she said "Sorry" got on to his passport, transferred the money from his account to that of the GULDEN, and handed it to him to verify, which he did with his thumbprint.

"Cabin 9," she said, her English only a bit twisted. She handed him a keycard and gestured with a sideways jerk of her head.

The rail was cold and wet beneath his right hand. He glanced for the last time at the tiny manufacturing town, productive once more with its old-style foundries now that nan was outlawed in Europe. Thick black smoke poured from tall stacks, a few shades darker than the dreary sky.

Cold air filled his lungs with the tang of carbon. Despite the ridiculous, childish pollution, all was straightforward here, the pain in his heart echoed by this local failure of a technology—nanotechnology—he once fervently believed in.



As an engineer, he still appreciated its possibilities, but the difference was that now he understood that every change involved a spectrum of possibilities, not just the one—the positive, the bright.

He fumbled with his card, let himself into the close cabin. The black radiance of memory blossomed, its imperceptibly small strings snaking through his mind like a tumor which he could not kill without killing himself. And why not? Why not kill himself?

But then too, why?

After twenty-four hours, he answered a knock at his door. The red-haired woman was there and stared at him curiously for a moment, then said "Amsterdam," and hurried away.

His heart lifted in spite of himself as the sun poured in through the open door when she left. Feeling hollow and light-headed, he rubbed the stubble on his face and stared out at the teeming city. He could see tiny figures standing on the huge pier, black against the sun. Bicycle spokes glittered as packs of bikers swirled among clots of pedestrians and past umbrellaed tables where people sat drinking.

Stannis saw, with a slight shock, that the wharf was packed with a swarm of holies, playing off one another's beams, leaping and dancing with obvious untrammelled joy. Black market nan machines lived scattered throughout their brains, infinitesimally small transmitters which, after intense bio-feedback, projected signals which could be picked up by receivers and then holographically displayed as images. In the US the nan machines were available legally, licensed for therapeutic use, and were time-limited—or so he had been told. The legal nan devices did not replicate, but decayed into biological components when their time was up. The illegal nan self-replicated. As far as he knew, this was feared and banned by Europe like all nan, but he supposed it too was accepted in this accepting city.

Desperate, Stannis had tried the time-limited nan. He now thought it bullshit. His therapy temporary hadn't helped him. Europe, with its hysterical fear of nan, banned anyone who had even had a temporary until a year after its expiration, but he'd had his passport doctored to remove any record of his folly.

As Stannis watched the holies cavort, he felt, suddenly, quite empty. Frighteningly so. Chimerical creatures flickered briefly in the air and vanished, like doors to other universes—a shotgun was aimed at him, a waterfall foamed briefly over wet rocks, a woman sat next to a child in bed, reading a book.

What had his own visions been, in that small white therapy cubicle? He projected art, mostly, from exhibits he and Annais had seen at the National Gallery. His therapist despaired. "These are a smoke-

screen. You are concealing your real feelings even from yourself." Who wouldn't? he wondered. Is that bad? If so, aren't *you* supposed to do something about it? No, he was told, it was up to him. Thanks a lot.

Stannis scanned a ten-language sign which briefly stated that a local museum consortium infused the wharf air with polarizing beams which made the projections more intense than normal. He hesitated, then shrugged. It was disturbing, this reminder of another of his failures, but at least his own ability to project had expired. He steeled himself, walked down the clanging ramp, and stepped into the gauntlet.

He ignored the holies and their smiling idiot faces, striding across the square through a multitude of visions until suddenly he was confronted with a sunflower.

Its weedy green stem was tall and covered with what looked like a million tiny hairs. Brilliant yellow petals fanned out gloriously from the center, as high as Stannis' own head, packed with a thousand seeds. He looked around, but no one was near.

He realized the projection was his.

He felt wildly disoriented. Everything else around him seemed brilliant, splashes of wavering color with no clear boundaries. The song his daughter had sung around the house just before she died came unbidden to his mind. Sunflowers have no face, he had teased her, but suddenly this one did. Instead of the huge, staring seed-eye there was Claire, snub-nosed and blue-eyed.

Stannis fled through the projections into the narrow, ancient streets. The buildings seemed to lean over him, as if wider at the top than at the bottom. Small electric cars crawled past, barely able to squeeze past one another. Sweating, Stannis turned into a doorway under a sign which said "Rooms."

The tiny lobby had a musty dark green carpet. The man behind the desk looked very old. He spoke perfect English and gave Stannis a heavy old-fashioned key. Stannis climbed crooked stairs.

His room looked out over the street, which was about ten feet across. He flung open the window and dank air rushed in. The sky had clouded up—bad weather was following him. He slumped into the single worn chair and stared at the bricks of the building across the street.

Claire was dead. Annais was dead. The months and years would blend together and time would wash him further and further away from that bright, glowing, impossible time.

They were both dead when he came home one afternoon. Lying peaceful and pale and smiling on the bed he and Annais had shared for ten years. Annais' scrawled note said, "Sorry—beautiful—can't stop." Cause of death: "Infovirus synergistically combined with genetic enhancement patterns. Synaptic overload." Knowing too much and thinking

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too fast. Seeing the possibilities flower around them, washing them with pain and light. Stannis watched it happen. He had not known exactly what was going on—how could he? He had not known how it would end.

He got up and closed the window. It was cold here. He pulled the curtains. On the bedside table were tourist brochures. Gourmet barge rides. Tree-shaded canals. The Van Gogh Museum. Well, he'd seen enough art, hadn't he? The real thing, just like Annais had wanted but which they had never had time for. Anger flared through him. No doubt she'd *known* exactly how that would feel, to travel to Europe, the three of them. She had probably *seen* this possibility too—the death of herself and Claire, his own solitary journey. His pain. Or perhaps there were certain blindnesses? Perhaps this had been something she hadn't seen at all in the vast multiplicity of possibilities? He had to believe that.

Stannis turned the page. The Dancers at the Wharf. He shivered, remembering the sunflower. Apparently his temporary ability had not expired yet.

Well, this is your chance, he told himself. Your chance to *know*, to lay all doubt to rest. Your chance to be with them, in that last, particular way. To find out what really happened. Do it, or go back and pine the rest of your life away, knowing you were a coward.

He pocketed his key and walked down to the street.

It was crowded with business people and strolling tourists. Cafes lined the street; scent of fresh coffee and bread filled the damp air. Everyone seemed beautifully well-dressed, in what he now recognized as ubiquitous eurostyle. Simple lines and sharp angles; muted tones. Everything was still expensive here, just the way they liked it. Consumers couldn't simply imagine what they wanted to wear, and sketch it out on a screen, and tinker with it, try it on holographically and then have it cheaply and individually constructed via nan. That's how one could buy clothing in Asia, separated from Europe by a fragile nan-free zone a hundred miles wide.

Of course, that wouldn't last long; they were idiots here to think that it could. They needed to get on with life, accept the inevitable changes nan would bring to the economy and everything else.

Right. He couldn't even get on with his own life.

He forced himself to lean against a brick storefront and got out his wallet, half-hoping that the name he had encoded in the middle of one of his files had been lost, and the precise numbers which defined, according to government files he had no trouble accessing, the exact virus which had enhanced Annais and Claire.

Those nans had migrated, as intended, to the part of their brain which organized one's sense of time. He had read, late one rainy night at his screen, not caring in the least if he was caught beyond the encryption barrier, that this particular strain was developed as part of the Information Wars program. It was one of the many creations of the division whose task was to see how best to drive people crazy in very specific ways, or artificially enhance very minute aspects of the brain's functioning. Create again the synaptic conditions which made learning languages easy for children. Things like that.

He had the parameters. He punched the final button and there they were, gleaming on the tiny screen.

In Amsterdam, there were people who made and sold such things. They were legal, here, just like many other substances which were illegal elsewhere, but usually one had to make contact through one of their scouts, and the buyer was extensively checked, for the sellers were the inevitable target of international terrorists. Stannis also had a name. Hans Utrecht.

He turned off his wallet, feeling faint. When did you last eat? he scolded himself, and dropped onto a bench. Should he try to find Hans?

He had battled this impulse for what seemed like a very long time, then gave in and came to Europe, drew a bit closer to *this*. Survivor's guilt, the therapist had told him—was it really that simple? His hands were clammy. The Louvre was the worst of it, filled with treasures she always longed to see *really*. When Claire was a bit older and could appreciate it. And he finally thought himself well out of it up there—where had he been? Norway? Finland? He hadn't cared. He blinked away sudden tears. What had really *happened* to them? How could they leave him behind like this? How could Annais have possibly made such a decision? Had she? Had there been a point, as she had apparently half-believed, in her bliss, where she could have *decided* to stay or go? And what about Claire? Had Annais not cared about Claire? Unbelievable. If she *had* a choice, she must have believed that she and Claire were heading into some realm much better than the one in which they left him behind. She *must* have. And what might that have been?

Someone touched his shoulder and he jumped, whirled.

It was the woman with the red hair.

Her sleek rain helmet was gone now, and her short red hair was ruffled by the wind. Her wide gray eyes were fringed by thick dark lashes, and looked at him searchingly, roving his face as if extracting inexplicably vital information. Her hands were stuffed into the pockets of a black leather flight jacket. "I saw you," she said.

He stared back at her. What did she want? "Yes," he said. "On the boat."

"No," she said. "On the wharf."

He didn't say anything. He couldn't. She had seen

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his passport, and she had seen that it lied. He had the same ability, illegal in the rest of Europe, as those crazies on the wharf.

She continued to look at him, hesitant about something. Was she going to report him? He was relieved when all she said was, "You should really visit the Van Gogh museum. I do, just about every time I'm in town. It's worth the admission. Van Gogh was quite a philosopher." As if she were a tour guide, she pulled a well-worn book about Van Gogh from her jacket pocket. It fell open to a page she had apparently read and reread. "Look what he says about death. 'Given the prodigious number of births, each individual death is not too carefully recorded—but what does this matter? It is the multitude that counts.'"

Her voice was clear and cultured. He relaxed; apparently she was just a bit of a crackpot, but interested in art, like Annais.

"What do you think that means?" he asked her, suddenly alert, having thought about nothing but death for months.

She slapped the book shut and smiled. "Who knows?" she said. She stuffed it back in her pocket, then linked her arm through his as he stood still as a statue. "Come on," she said. "They drink a very good liquor here. Let me buy you one. Please."

He followed her down a short flight of stairs into a dark room with many booths. Several people greeted her. Stannis must have looked surprised, because she said, "Amsterdam is my home," as they slid into a booth.

She was Lise. She remembered his name from the passport. Lise ordered for them, small fluted glasses of jenever and a basket of tiny crisp fried fish.

"I did see your projection, you know," she said. "Were you surprised? You moved away very quickly."

"Yes. No. I suppose," he said. To cover his embarrassment, he grabbed a handful of fish and transferred them to the white plate in front of him, and sprinkled them with vinegar. His hand shook as he set the bottle back down. She reached over and touched it, but removed her hand quickly. He took several deep breaths. "It was supposed to be a temporary, for therapy."

"It's not a crime you know," she said. "Not here. The thinking is that it is not the fault of the people who have these modifications—particularly since it is against EG sanctions, now, to have them changed again. It is simply usual to try and conceal yourself—avoid situations which might make the contents of your subconscious visible. It's mostly done at private parties. That's why there's such a daring exhilaration about doing it in public. One of the reasons it's so frightening is because someone who has not had any training will be absolutely spilling over with

bizarre and disturbing sexual thoughts, murderous images, all that we have grown so expert at concealing. It's a theater of the mind. I guess it did have a therapeutical purpose, in the beginning." She paused. "That was a beautiful face you made, within the sunflower." Her voice caught a bit, and she coughed and took a sip of water.

"It was my daughter," he said.

"Oh. Yes. An old picture?"

"Five years old," he said, wondering at how short a time that seemed.

"So she's about six now? Seven?" Lise asked but the pause made him think that she knew, but was still not exactly sure. Suddenly angry, he sat back in the booth. "They're both dead. Her, and my wife."

"How did it happen?" she asked. Almost too eagerly, he thought, but looking at her he saw only concern and sadness.

"They decided together. Without me."

"They *decided*?" she asked.

"I think so."

"Tell me," she said. "Please. I don't think the therapy worked."

Loosened by the jenever or something deeper, led by her fathomless eyes, he tried to think of where to start. It surprised him when the words tumbled out.

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"I blame myself for not figuring out what was happening. We got in the way of a terrorist several years ago, and she released some nans, apparently, that the government had been experimenting with in New Hong Kong. Annais had a pretty high clearance, and I used it for quite a while before they thought to close it. One official finally admitted that an experimental time nan did exist. But apparently you had to have genetically engineered gifted fragments in order for the nan to take effect in this particular way."

"Do you have gifted fragments?"

"Yes," he said, "Though I can't say that it's made a big difference in my life, ability-wise. It often doesn't."

"No, it doesn't," she agreed, and coughed violently. She took a sip of water and continued. "So why didn't it happen to you?"

"I didn't breathe," he said. "It was like a wildfire, this power of thought," he said. "Apparently, from what I can piece together now, they thought out all the possibilities in a white heat."

"The possibilities?" Lise asked, her eyes still as the sky on an overcast day. She was curled into a corner of the booth, her red hair lit gently by lamplight. She had ordered a bowl of strong hot tea, filled it with milk and sugar, and held it in both hands, sipping every now and then. Had her face paled when he said the word *possibilities*, or was it the light?

"Every branching of possible lives that they could live, every permutation of being," he said. "Somehow they could *see* them."

Lise did not object. She just sipped, and listened,



occasionally frowning to herself.

Stannis explained that, on looking back on those last few weeks he fancied he could almost see their heads shine with the power of their thought and then they were gone, having *lived* and *lived* and sorted through the probabilities and found most of them wanting but at any rate the possibilities were there, known, available somehow in a way he could not understand.

He told Lise of something that happened one evening when Claire was almost six.

They lived on a hill and the lights of the city were beginning to glow through the rain. He poured a finger of Scotch and rested in his leather chair. A tiny Van Gogh pencil sketch was dim across from him on the wall.

The door creaked open and it was Claire.

"It's dark in here, Daddy," she said.

"Turn on the light," he suggested, but instead she went to the window and stared out at the lights. She stared a lot, lately, and it was beginning to bother him.

"Claire," he said, and she turned. He could not see her expression in the dark.

"Come here," he suggested, feeling troubled. "Sit on my lap."

She did. "What's up?" he asked.

"Oh," she said, "I've just been thinking."

"About what?"

"Our telecom number. It's a prime number."

"Really," he said. He thought for a minute. He couldn't factor it easily. "Maybe," he said. "What makes you think so? How did you figure it out?"

She looked at him and said, "I don't know," but it was not with the tone of someone bewildered, just someone who took it for granted and did not care. She slid off his lap and ran out the door. It only took a few moments on network to find a list of primes and to determine that she was right.

No steps—she just *knew*. Why should that frighten him? Perhaps he was just a bit jealous?

He thought about the headaches Annais had complained of the last few months, for which the doctors could find no reason. Stress, they decided, and suggested biofeedback. With no organic basis, Annais felt free to brush them off. She was experiencing a powerful burst of creativity which had borne her along for months. "The problem is," she said, "that what I am thinking is very simple actually. It has to do with the final theory, you know, the explanation for the universe itself. String theory—can you believe it? That old warhorse. But I can visualize every step, everything I need to do. Down to the last detail. *Exactly* how time splits. How mind is meshed to matter. The *meaning* of the observer, the power of the observer. But it flashes by so swiftly that it's really hard to catch hold of, to write down . . . Stannis, it's scary sometimes."

Indeed.

The three of them were sitting in the kitchen one

Sunday morning when Annais started and Claire actually ran over to the telecom then stopped. She turned around looking frightened, then ran to Annais who hugged her, with tears in her eyes.

"What?" he asked.

Annais just shook her head, her face white, but Claire turned and said, "I heard the telecom ring but it was Wednesday."

"Wednesday *afternoon*," said Annais, looking out the window.

But after that there were weeks of bliss. They did not speak of such things again, not in front of Stannis, anyway. Both of their faces became transparent and eager. Both of them lost weight and looked like wraiths, but wraiths angelic; beautiful. Claire sang the sunflower song endlessly, joyfully, until its first three climbing notes were enough to make his stomach churn. He felt more and more uncomfortable.

"We *are* information," Annais said at one point, her eyes wild and bright. "*Everything* is. That's *all* we are. That's *all* there *is*. Don't you see?"

"Not in quite the same way as you see, I think," he had replied, fighting back panic. "Maybe you should go back to the doctor." But Annais insisted that what was happening was a logical outcome of her work, and that Claire *should* be doing a bit of light algebra now, as some of her more advanced agemates were—she was just a few steps beyond them.

It had been three years since the terrorist attack. But now, he couldn't forgive himself for not seeing the obvious connection. And what could he have done? Annais had become childlike, an equal, in some way, of Claire, though it had always been her power of abstract thought to which he was so powerfully attracted. He had always felt that she lived in a world which he, a structural engineer, could not fathom, and he respected and admired her entirely. Until this last decision.

Had it been a decision? *That was what he had to know!*

"How happy it would make me to find out I could have done nothing," he heard himself saying, as he looked down at a napkin he had torn into tiny bits. "Even if I only knew that for an instant!"

There was a way to know.

He took a deep breath, then asked Lise. "Does the name Hans Utrecht mean anything to you?"

Her eyes widened, and something—resignation?—flashed in them. Then, a tilt of the head, a brief smile to herself, not to him, as if she had made a decision. "I can get you in touch with these people, yes."

She wanted to walk him back to his hotel, but he refused. She gave a businesslike nod, hesitated a moment, then turned and vanished into the now-dark streets.

I can  
visualize  
every step, every-  
thing I need to do.  
Down to the last  
detail. Exactly how  
time splits. How  
mind is meshed  
to matter.



Hans met him in an ancient java house and actually argued with him over curry. He was short and heavy with a florid face mostly covered with a reddish beard which came to a point beneath his chin. Apparently Lise had told Hans what she knew about Stannis and that worried Hans somewhat. "You're a grown man, of course, but this has proven particularly dangerous. I have been with several people who tried it. One of them went around talking about what would happen tomorrow. Of course, none of it happened, but he was so very *sure*. Another—well—she kept reliving going to the circus one day when she was five. And there were others."

"Did any die?"

"I heard of only one who died, but I don't know if it was related, of course. But I can't say that they were the same again. Theirs were time-limited, though. Just a day, but it had a profound effect. Most of them pretty much dropped out. Agreed there was no point."

Stannis was not surprised. Perhaps their genes had not been modified in the particular way of himself, Claire, and Annais. Apparently the way it bonded to a particular type of mitochondria was crucial.

"How long does it take to—take effect?"

Hans signalled for another coffee.

"About an hour."

"The other took three years."

"That's easy enough to program if you like."

"No," said Stannis.

"We can make it self-limiting," Hans said. "At least that."

Stannis thought. Finally he said, "No."

Stannis had only to wait until the following morning before sniffing up his nose that which had killed his wife and child.

Lise was there, sitting across from him in his room in a shabby chair, reading. "You can't be alone," she insisted. He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes.

And fell asleep.

When he woke, he was disoriented, then more alert. He sat up, alarmed, then disappointed. "What time is it?"

"About eleven," she said, closing her bookmaster and sticking it in her pocket.

"Hans must have given me duds," he said. How sad he felt. But—now he had done his best. He could go home.

He rose. He had not bothered to shave. He looked in the mirror. "You look fine," she said. "Let's go out. I'm hungry."

It happened in the first block. He felt wretchedly ill, but only for about thirty seconds. Pain seared through his temples and everything went white. He

heaved as if he were going to vomit, and supported himself with one hand against the rough bricks of the building next to him.

When his vision cleared, he saw Lise standing in front of him, her face concerned and sympathetic.

He also saw the two of them walking ahead—yes, that *was* Lise and himself, looking in a store window and laughing.

The strangeness of it was overwhelming. He should not have done this. How could Annais and Claire possibly have coped? No wonder.

Where in this world were they? Perhaps—panic hit him—perhaps he should have had Hans make it start next month, when he was back home, and then they would be everywhere, in the townhouse, out on the street, and he could choose, he could follow them—

The pressure was unbearable. He began to run. Perhaps *now* the projections would do some good! He paused and let Lise catch up. "Which way is the wharf? Hurry!"

He had to make what he was thinking *visible, real*. If there was a place Claire and Annais were, if somehow he knew, with some hidden part of his mind, the place where they were caught forever on the crest of a breaking wave—

Down a narrow street, he saw blue water. Lise yanked on his arm and he turned, rushed down the hill, arrived gasping at the wide cobblestone wharf, and pushed through dancing holies into the central ring.

He stared as all around him brightened, pixilated, then faded—the tourists sipping wine and pointing from their tables around the perimeter; the other holies with their weak, shivering images. He felt very warm.

There! There they were! Claire! Annais! But—lying on the bed, their final resting place. Smiling, holding hands. He gasped, reached, shouted—

Then they were gone and how odd: numbers swirled around him, tiny, like black insects, delicate, meshing and linking, building into fleeting, concrete realities which dissolved as rapidly as they formed.

He heard shouts, felt himself shoved roughly, as if his body were someone else's. Staggering, he fell. Hands grasped his wrists, dragged him across the rough cobblestones, and dropped him.

He opened his eyes and touched his temple. It hurt. His hand came away sticky. "Get him *out* of here, man," he heard someone say to Lise, who was bending over him. "He's dangerous."

Lise helped him stand. She was stronger than she looked. He leaned against her, took a deep breath, said, "I can walk. What happened?"

"You blew them out of the water, that's what. They'll never top that. It was like a neutron bomb hit. Pure light. For a moment, *no* one could see." She put her arm around him and helped him walk, made him sit on a bench next to a canal. She dipped a tissue in the water and wiped the abrasion on his forehead.

The  
pressure  
was unbearable.  
He began to run.  
He had to make  
what he was  
thinking visible,  
real.



"Rest," she said.

"They didn't act this way," he said, in despair. "They were so cool, so calm. And they seemed to know so much more."

"People are different," she said.

Easy enough for *you* to be so philosophical, he thought.

And then his vision splintered once more.

He felt the hard bench beneath him, Lise's hand on his arm, yet he stared down the empty street and saw—

Claire.

She looked as if she were five or six. She pounded towards him, running very fast, wearing blue pants and a yellow shirt, not pausing to look in any of the inviting windows of the storefronts she passed.

As she approached she grew older, past the age when she had left him, on through womanhood. Children flickered at her side and vanished, as if she ran through their strata and left them.

Ten feet from him an old woman stopped and stared at him, as if immensely puzzled. Her hair was pure white; she stood straight and dignified. She tilted her head and said, "Who...?"

Vision quieted. He saw but one reality, but it was sharp-edged with oddly muted colors, almost as if the colors were low, whirring sounds filled with some imperative quality, some demand which surfaced among the possibilities and drew him here, then there, down Damrak street, over to Voortburgwal. Every cell in his body felt alive, every atom, every tachyon, every possible vector and direction of time flowering from him, headed toward him, came alive in the streets of Amsterdam, as if the city itself lived, and as if it were in tune with something deep within him. All possibilities came to just *this*. Just these streets, this time. Life and death, the great divide, the great dichotomy, did not really exist.

Annais and Claire were a part of Amsterdam. They were with him always. They were within Lise, here at his side. Selves might die yet one self would continue to live. That was the truth of the matter. And why choose one or the other, or pretend to choose? Will, intent, and desire sublimed from him, leaving something his being manifested as truth, as reality. And—there was the Van Gogh Museum.

He stood on a corner across from it, jostled by a crowd crossing the street. He smelled sauerkraut and mustard, heard sausages sizzle in a cart next to him.

He must have been heading here all along, just as he had been heading toward Amsterdam without acknowledging it. happening in the outer world, in the real world. It is all just something happening to your own brain, nothing more.

*So beautiful. Sorry—can't stop.*

He was aware that sweat was running down his face, and that his body was once more in turmoil. His calm vanished. A moment of anger was washed

away as he slid down a sleek funnel of inferences each of which expanded like lit crystals but he could not really stop to see any of them. There were always more, each one leading to the next and he could not stop himself but must slide on and on and on, with greater and greater speed until he would incinerate and glow, infinitely. It might seem to others that he had died, of course, but he would keep thinking on and on and being on and on, like Claire, like Annais, o Annais...

"Sir, are you all right?" asked the woman inside the ticket booth.

"Where?" he stammered. "The painting of *Sunflowers*?"

"Turn left at the end of the corridor and go through two salons. On the far wall of the third."

There was no guard in the third room. The floor was thin strips of polished oak and the walls were very white, that gleaming, powerful, inviting, assaulting *white*—

And there they were.

They?

He concentrated on approaching them, the three paintings of massed sunflowers, their centers huge somehow and almost menacing but blessedly free of faces, stems bent from rough handling, fresh from the fields and glowing with released light.

Three?

He heard footsteps behind him. Damn, he thought, get out of here, leave me alone, I'm dying. I'm living. I'm heading *towards* them, there's just this one last thing which I must do here... *something*, I don't remember...

"It's amazing, isn't it," Lise said, a few feet to his side, hands clasped behind her back. "Did you notice? In the other salons? Probably not, you just rushed through them. Van Gogh made many copies of a lot of his paintings. Many *attempts*. That's what touches me the most. I come here and see them almost every time I'm in the city; I never tire of looking. In fact, I saw them the day the GULDEN arrived, the instant I was off." She paused, then added, "It helps."

It helps?

He began to notice the differences in the paintings.

Lise continued, in a calm voice, as if nothing extraordinary was happening. "Look; the panel below quotes Van Gogh." She stepped forward and read the small black letters on clear plexiglass. "He says, 'I have three canvases going—1st, three huge flowers in a green vase... 2nd, three flowers, one, gone to seed... If I carry out this idea there will be a dozen panels.'" She bent closer to the plaque. "'Death is part of existence; more than that, it is the moment of self-existence, of absolute existence... Van Gogh sought a victory for which the price was life itself... only by succumbing to the annihilation of the self could his work become an existential act, and not an individual act.'" Some critic—Giulio Argan—said that about *Sunflowers*.

Every  
cell in his  
body felt alive,  
every possible  
vector and direction  
of time flowering  
from him, alive in  
the streets  
...





Stannis' thoughts flared as if from some concentrated, energized center.

Many sunflower attempts. Profligate humans. It is all right to try, to change, to grow, to improve. Our dead billions are not dead. The nameless beautiful multitudes—what had he said—"it is the multitude that matters?"—left the conscious fodder of their lives and accomplishments, though even the most luminous were but faint traces of light arcing through life for an impossibly brief time.

Perhaps Van Gogh had been struggling on the shore of the ocean where Claire and Annais now *were*. Surging toward perfection single-mindedly, with all his powers, then *past* it, *through* it, making the possibilities concrete, heading into the light. Yes, he thought, it was just that their minds were capable of understanding much more about beauty than mine. Claire and Annais were much more brilliant to begin with. Thought and the shapes of time and the decisions of it were something different and much more real for them . . .

Annais and Claire had chosen to hover at the point of light forever where life and death were no longer a dichotomy. All possibilities existed within that point, within their act, forever. To choose, for them, had had no meaning.

Stannis saw what they had thought—at last. But he saw it as a path of thought he could choose to take. Or not.

But there, at the end, beckoning to him, were Annais and Claire.

And then they were not human, but just the powerful light he had so often seen as their overwhelming final quality, beating into him forever with their hearts and minds, uniting with him—

They are dead, he thought. Dead in this world. Gone for me. But he could *see* where they went! Truly! Where worlds multiply; where time *does* have a stop. The walls seemed to be dissolving around him; the sunflowers grew huge and bright and unutterably beautiful and he was one cell's tick away, one chemical messenger this side of that place



where they *shone*—and the sunflowers glowed brighter—he *could* follow them—it would seem to others that he had died, but they would be wrong—

"No!"

Lise's shout startled him; pulled him back. She grasped his arm so hard it hurt.

He bent over, breathing heavily, ignoring the guard who rushed into the room and watched him curiously.

"Look," she whispered fiercely, shaking his arm. "See!"

Sunflowers. So many of them And—

This was what Claire had been trying to tell him, there at the end, with her song.

She had *seen* this possibility; had *known* he would come here, though he knew now how different it must have seemed to her, what she saw and what she knew and what she hoped. But she had chosen for him, with her song. She had known, and had told him that she really could know. But why *here* . . . what was *here*?

He turned. Lise was watching him—

And then he knew. Just by the look on her face, and then by some slight, glimpsed future, *one* future—

"You took the same nans. The ones that they . . ." Stannis stared at Lise.

A brief nod, her face wary. "Several years ago, in Bangkok."

"Why?" he asked. "Have you been following me?"

"No," she said softly. "Not at all." He must have looked threatening, for she said, "Don't worry. I don't work for the government, not any government. Especially not the one who created this, though afterwards they were all over me, wanting data which I refused. I went through this alone, in a hotel room." She smiled wryly. "It's never over, though. I was a very good singer in a not-very-good band, slumming, I guess; my parents had trained me to sing opera and they had just died in a car wreck. We had a gig at a hotel bar. I was stupid. I took it on a dare."

"So why did you come to Amsterdam?"

"I came back because I wanted to *live*." Her eyes grew darker, more intense. She hugged herself and looked at the floor. "I was terrified that I might—not; or rather, life was so terribly different. And music pulled me too far, too fast. There's too much of it! It goes everywhere! Permutations—overwhelming! Hearing and hearing them, you know? Thinking about them, inventing more, thinking about intervals, chords, notes, their individuality, their possible combinations!"

She looked up at him, and now her eyes were wild.

"Please, *know*!" she said, her voice urgent.

He was frightened, suddenly, afraid for her. The look in her eyes was Annais's, and Claire's—exultant, dazzling, transcendent. "So beautiful," Lise whispered; fear, and something else, made his heart beat harder. "It pulls me—"

He caught and embraced her. "Tell me how to help you," he said. "Tell me." Tell me, as Annais and

Claire did not, locked in their journey together, leaving me out, leaving me behind. Leaving me guilty and in pain.

"This helps," she said, her voice muffled against him, and so he held her tighter.

She let go, and turned to the paintings. She spoke without looking at him, as if trying to calm herself; her voice shook slightly at first.

"I came to Amsterdam for *The Sunflowers*," she said. "We came here many times when I was a child. Maybe it had something to do with missing my parents; I don't know. I started dreaming about sunflowers. They were intense. Very real. Finally it seemed that they were all that could help me, and I wasn't sure why. But everything else was useless. I found that if I concentrated on them, every time I wanted to—follow my thoughts, follow the *music*, I could stay."

She stared at them as if, even now, they were utterly necessary. "I couldn't sing anymore—that was the worst thing. The music seemed to be pulling me—beyond. To a place of enormous beauty, to all the classical music I studied when I was a child. Where I could *be* that music, and every piece of new music every known piece suggested. Where I could live . . . forever."

Her laugh was harsh. "I got an ordinary job, as ordinary as possible, and started coming here, and reading Van Gogh's letters at night, thousands of them, to his brother Theo. Death pulled Van Gogh too, though he saw death differently, I think, than most people—he saw it as some kind of threshold, yet I'm not sure if he thought there was anything beyond it. The threshold was *all*. These paintings are his attempt to ground himself, to be beyond both life and death, to simply *be*. They are filled with thought, but they go far beyond it. They are desperate. Like me. It's kind of funny, really, how much Van Gogh thought about these exact same things. The sunflower was to Van Gogh the problem of his own existence. His sunflowers help me to *be*, to *stay*."

"You must have seen me, then—?" Stannis asked. Suddenly it seemed very important.

"Of course," she said. Her voice was sure and steady.

She looked at him once more, and within her gray eyes the possibilities multiplied.

He took Lise's hand, and gazed once more at the brilliant, powerful sunflowers, Van Gogh's answer to the infinite threshold of death.

She said, her voice stronger now, "It's odd—I seem to be filled with light."

Claire and Annais glowed around Stannis. He felt as if he had travelled, in an instant, to the end of the universe and back. Life effervesced, filled with inferences and realities he could almost touch. The brilliant flowers drew him into their center, past life; past death, until he was simply, entirely *here*.

"I seem to be filled with sunflowers," he said. He paused for a moment, searching for words, then found them. "Sunflowers need light."

Together they turned and walked out of the gallery. ■



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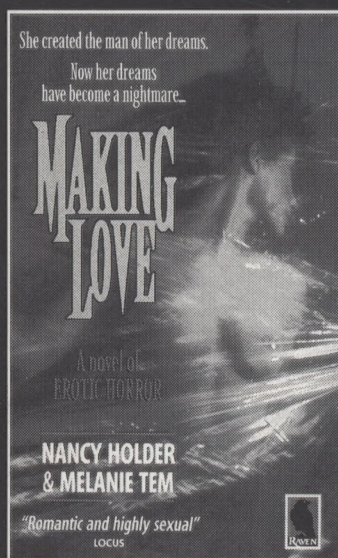
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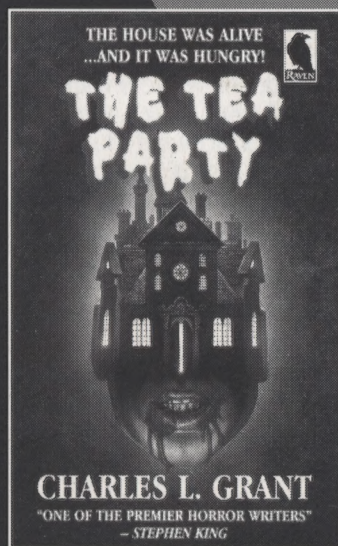
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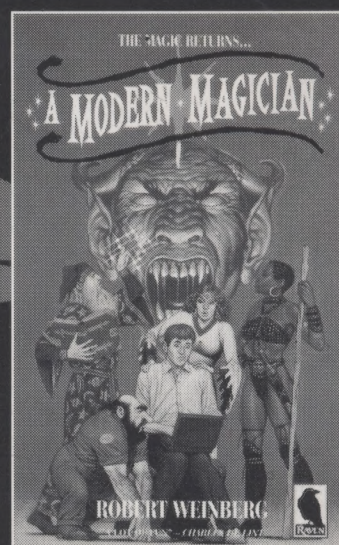
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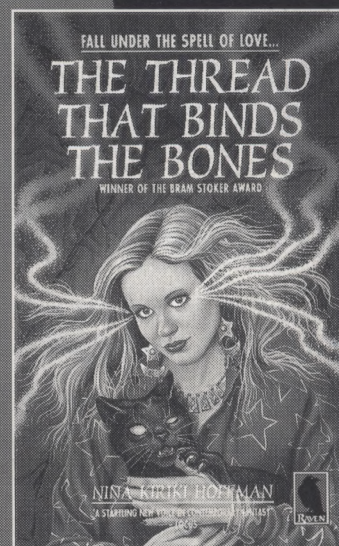
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